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THE COSMIC DESTROYER

by Alexander Blade

SEPTEMBER, 1957



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SEPTEMBER 1957

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William L. Hamling
Editor

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Front cover painting by Lloyd Rognan, suggested by, "The Cosmic Destroyer"

Published bi-monthly by Greenleaf Publishing Company, 814 Dempster St., Evanston, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Evanston, Illinois. Additional entry at Sandusky, Ohio. Address all communications to IMAGINATIVE TALES, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois. We do not accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or art work; submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed return envelope. Accepted material is subject to whatever revision is necessary to meet requirements, and will be paid for at our current rates. The names of all characters used in stories are fictitious; any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental. Copyright 1957 Greenleaf Publishing Company. Subscription rate \$3.00 12 issues. Advertising rates sent upon request. Printed in U.S.A. by Stephenne Printing Corp., Sandusky, Ohio. Volume 4, Number 5.

The Editorial.....

A meeting with a new artist—new to stf, that is—(you'll be seeing his work shortly in both *Tales* and *Madge*) has suggested a new department for our science fiction magazines. Tentatively we are calling it the UFO REPORT.

DURING the course of our discussion with the artist—D. Bruce Berry—the subject of flying saucers came up. It came up because Bruce asked us a question: "How come the people who comment and report on flying saucers don't talk about the really big ones?" We politely inquired as to what Bruce meant by "big ones". He then related a personal experience which kind of rocked us.

SEVERAL years ago he had occasion to take a date up to Twin Peaks in the Frisco region of California. While there, overlooking the vast area beneath (it was a foggy day below) he suddenly sighted a "very large tear-shaped object hovering in the air almost at eye-level a few miles away. The object appeared to glow as if from some powerful energy source within it. It then began to move slowly toward the West—the open sea—with ever increasing speed. It left a flame trail behind it approximately eight times the length of the object. It vanished into the West with no audible sound to mark its passage."

DELVING further, Bruce stated that his date—a high school teacher—saw the object too. She commented: "I saw it but I don't believe it." Other pertinent information: the object appeared to be entirely smooth—no protuberances—and its color, a yellowish orange.

WHAT was it? Bruce feels it was a space ship—and from all accounts of flying saucers it was apparently much larger than any of those. He refrained from reporting the incident knowing the skepticism that would greet such a report.

WELL, this has rekindled our own interest and curiosity about "Unidentified Flying Objects" and we wonder how many other reliable citizens have witnessed equally puzzling phenomena. Thus, the idea for a department in both IMAGINATION and IMAGINATIVE TALES on UFO.

DON'T be bashful. Let's hear from you. In science fiction there is no such thing as ridicule on subjects going beyond the ken of science or so-called "credibility". All we require is a concise and accurate report of what *you* saw or experienced. We will publish the reports in our new department. It will give everyone a chance to discuss and compare notes. And, we trust, throw more light on a very puzzling subject. Fair enough? Ok, get those reports in wlh



"As pilot of the Moon Rocket you will be paid ten cents a mile to
and from your destination—plus any expenses incurred on route."





THE COSMIC DESTROYER

by Alexander Blade

Barron had two choices: he could leave the Pleiades peacefully, or stay to hunt a girl who—if he found her—would destroy the entire galaxy!

SAM BARRON was not more than fifteen yards away from STARLADY when the first explosive pellets whistled over his head, following an outburst of angry shouting from the crowd.

He had taken care not to get too far away. Barron had traded all his life in the Pleiades, first in his father's ship and then in his

own STARLADY—who was not a lady at all but a sloppy old bag with rust in her primary tubes and a rattle in every plate. He knew all the worlds of the Seven Sisters stars, and he knew this world Esha of the blue star Sirrit better than any of them. If he had a home planet and a people, they were here. So the wrongness had hit him

like a wave the minute he stepped out of STARLADY's lock with Joe Lucich, the First Mate.

There was always a crowd gathered on the spaceport to welcome a trading ship, or any ship at all. The Eshans were natural greeters. But this crowd was different. It was huge—there must have been twelve or thirteen hundred strung out in a thick sort of crescent, all adults and mostly men, with their white crests blowing and nodding in the wind. The women, about twenty of them wearing the black leotard of one of the amazon societies, stood together in a compact bunch a little ahead and outside of the crowd. They were armed with EP rifles. And all of them, men and women, were silent.

"What's it all about?" Joe Lucich had asked. "They act like they thought we had smallpox aboard."

"Barron had said, "I don't know. But we'll soon find out."

And he had walked with Lucich out across the landing field, toward the low flat building of the port authority, with the long storage sheds beyond it. But he had walked slowly, because the crowd was between them and the buildings and he did not think it was there by accident.

"Why the Goon Girls?" Joe had muttered, looking at the amazons.

"They're always off being holy somewhere, except when they're on business."

"They look," Barron had said, "as though they're on business now."

Then there was the sudden furious roar from the crowd, and the black-clad women shifted their ranks. Their rifles glinted brightly in the hot blue noon.

Sam Barron grabbed at Lucich and they both dropped.

The first fusillade went over them and popped with vicious flesh-bursting little cracks against STARLADY's hull or on the hard-fused ground. They got up and ran for the ship, bending low, while the amazons reloaded. They ran with the amazing speed of men whose lives are riding on their heels. The second fusillade was just a second too late.

"Close the lock!" Barron bel低owed.

Somebody jumped to obey. Strings of firecrackers were still exploding against the hull. Barron ran into the control room with Lucich at his heels. He could hear Lucich breathing, panting like a dog, and he knew he was doing the same thing. The glare of the blue sun outside had been hot, but not hot enough to make him sweat the way he was sweating. He was shocked and angry, as though his best friend had turned on him

savagely and without warning. He looked out the port.

The crowd had broken. It was spilling out over the landing field, a spate of lithe tall running forms and waving fists and white crests like battle-plumes, with the black shapes of the amazons scattered among them.

Old Viji, a seven-fingered humanoid from the other side of the Pleiades who had almost an esper linkage with drive-mechanisms, said dryly, "It looks like they're going to get you, Sam, one way or another. What did you do the last time you were here?"

Barron shook his head, watching the crowd.

"You, Joe?"

"Not one damned thing." Suddenly Lucich turned, his face crimson with rage. "But I'm going to do something now. I'm going to teach 'em they can't try to kill *me* and get away with it."

He flung himself into the pilot's seat and reached for the controls.

"Here," said Barron, "what are you doing?"

"Give 'em a blast," said Lucich, shaking with anger. "They want killing, okay. I'll give 'em some!"

"Get away from there," Barron said.

Lucich ignored him. His big hands reached for the lateral jet controls.

Barron swore. He knocked

Lucich bodily out of the seat and stood over him with his fist raised.

"Anybody gets killed around here it'll be you," said Barron. He was shaking too. "What do you want to do, get us all hung?"

Lucich glowered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. But his gaze dropped and he muttered, "All right, all right. But I still say they got no right to—"

"Here comes Hlann," said Viji.

Barron joined him at the port. A small ancient jeep, painted with silver paint and adorned with flags, was zigzagging through the crowd. Beside the driver a long lean man was standing up and gesticulating at the people as he passed them.

"About time," said Barron. "Somebody must have hauled him out of bed." Hlann was Port Authority, and on this starport he had plenty of spare time. He spent most of it sleeping.

Barron went down the corridor to the airlock, telling Lucich to come with him. He did not want to leave Lucich alone with the controls. "Open up," he said, "and stand by to slap her shut in a hurry."

He stepped into the lock and stood by the open door.

It slid open part way. Barron said, "That's enough." He peered around the edge. Hlann's jeep had now outdistanced the forefront of

the crowd, which was beginning to falter a bit as though realizing that it was already too close for safety if the ship should suddenly take off. Hlann was shouting at them, waving them back. He looked up and saw Barron in the lock.

"Get out of here," he shouted. "Esha is closed to Earthmen."

"Why, damn you," Barron cried, "I was born here!" He leaned out of the lock, shouting angrily. "What do you mean, Esha is closed?"

The crowd saw him and began again a bloodthirsty howling. Pellets cracked close by his head. He pulled in, stepping behind the shelter of the door. He could still see, at an oblique angle, the silver jeep racing to turn the crowd back. And he heard Hlann's voice crying,

"—can't hold them, Sam. Take her off. The Pleiades are closed!"

LUCICH SLAMMED the lock shut. He stared at Barron. "The Pleiades are closed?"

"That's what he said." Barron stared at Lucich, thinking. Thinking, they can't do that, I've got a full cargo and not much else, at this stage of the game. Not enough food and fuel to go anywhere else, and no place else to go.

"I think that's what he said," said Barron, hoping that he was wrong.

Viji shook his head. "I heard him. We might as well lift."

"But *why?*" demanded Lucich. "That's what I want to know." He looked at Barron. "I thought these were such great pals of yours. Hah! They wouldn't even tell you—"

"Oh, shut up," Barron said, and went back to the bridge. The silver jeep was herding the crowd back out of harm's way. Barron strapped into the pilot's seat and punched the relay that sounded the wheezy siren.

"Stand by for take-off."

Lucich, Viji, and the three other men of STARLADY's crew—two mechanics and a man who would have taken a degree in electronics if he had done his studying in classrooms and not in bars—also strapped themselves into the ancient and sagging recoil chairs. Of the six, only Barron and Lucich were of Earth descent, and only Lucich came from a world outside the Pleiades.

STARLADY belched, roared, and lumbered heavily into the sky, a beautiful sky of a blueness never dreamed of on Earth, flecked with mists of silver. Barron watched Esha fall away below him, the spaceport with the fringing groves of trees, the city of Khar-esh beyond it sprawling casually up and down over low hills in the bend of a river—a small city, really no more than a town of little white

houses built of the river mud, cool and dim inside against the hot glare of the sun. One of the houses was his. Trees surrounded the town, cultivated groves shading out into virgin forest. The forests spread into vast blobs of blue-green and silver, dotted with other and more distant towns, pocked with flat prairies, wrinkled and humped with mountains. There was the flat glimmer of a distant sea. Then it ran all together in a blue haze, became a disc and then a round ball, and the sky was gone, and STARLADY was out in open space.

And Esha was closed to him.

The Pleiades were closed.

He swore, bitterly, indignantly. "They can't do it," he said. "I've traded here all my life. So did my old man. My mother died on Esha, she's buried there. They can't keep me off. And what about the others?"

"What others?" growled Lucich, unconcerned with sentiment, seeing the rich worlds of the Pleiades glimmering away before his reaching hands.

"Red DeWalt," said Barron, naming them off. "Johnny Petrako. Old Man Kirk. Samelson and Collins. The bunch. They're all like us. They'll lose everything they've got if they're barred out of trade."

"So let them cry for themselves,"

said Lucich. "I'm worried about me."

Viji said, "Worry for all of us. Without more fuel and more supplies, we become a nice derelict somewhere in space."

STARLADY had just come from one of the hub worlds at Vega, where she had picked up her cargo in a market so big it covered most of a planet. Esha was her first worldfall in the Pleiades, and Barron had counted on replenishing his supplies there. He might go on, easily enough, to any of the two thousand or more stars in the group that had inhabited planets and were within reasonable reach. But with all the ports of the Pleiades closed against him, it wouldn't be much use. STARLADY couldn't go forward and she couldn't go back. She might as well stay where she was.

Barron flicked the controls and STARLADY waddled her wide beam into an orbital pattern, moving slowly above Esha.

Lucich said, "What are you doing?"

"Heading for the shadow."

"Why?"

"I'm going to hang there until Khar-esh comes around. Then I'm going to take the skiff and go down there and find out what the devil goes on!"

Lucich looked at him. "Who inherits the ship?" he asked sар-

castically. "Not that it matters much."

"Don't be in such a hurry to count the flock before the eggs are laid," said Viji. "Sam will come back. I see to the skiff."

He went out, yelling for the mechanics.

Sam Barron took STARLADY into the shadow and hung her there, between the dark planet and the glorious night sky of the Pleiades, with the stars burning like great lamps in the misty nebulosity that wraps them, all golden and soft and glowing.

When it was night in Khar-esh too, Barron got into the little skiff and dropped away from STARLADY, down toward the black unwelcoming face of the world that had changed so suddenly from home to a deadly ambush.

CHAPTER II

BARRON LANDED in a place he knew of about four miles from the city, where a series of wide granite shelves gave the forest no roothold. There was no reason why anyone should find the skiff there before dawn, nor indeed after it. Barron left it and went off through the forest.

After an hour or so of blundering about in the warm aromatic dark, tripping on roots and getting slapped by the low-hanging feath-

ery fronds of the honey-tree, he found the path he was looking for and went much faster, so that presently he was at the edge of the city.

Here he became infinitely cautious. He had dressed in a dark close-fitting coverall that merged his wiry middle-sized form almost indistinguishably into the shadows. His own close-cropped hair was like a dark cap on his head—an un-Eshan characteristic, but in this case good protective coloration. His face, burned to the color of saddle-leather by the many suns of the Pleiades, gave off no highlights. He moved softly, clinging close to walls or the shadowing gloom under clumps of trees.

There was a queer feeling about the city. It was too quiet, too closed in behind shuttered windows. Usually people were abroad in the warm night. Usually there was a sound of voices and laughter and music. Tonight there was not a murmur.

Or was there?

Barron frowned, listening to a faint echo carried on the still air. But he could not place it. It made him uneasy. It made him realize that no matter if he had been born here, no matter if he thought of this city and this planet as home, they were not really his, nor were these people really his. It made him understand how many things

there were about Esha that he did not know.

He climbed to the crest of one of the outlying hills and looked out over Khar-esha, standing guiltily under a tree at the back of somebody's garden.

The river ran wide and placid below him to the right. Above him the sky was a golden pall looped and fringed with stars, folded here and there with darkness where the nebulous clouds were split apart. In front of him was the city, darker than usual, its welcoming door-lamps unlit, its streets deserted. Only in one place was there light.

That was around the temple on the top of the highest hill. There many lamps and torches burned, so that even at this distance Barron could see the gleaming golden helix that spiraled up more than a hundred feet high. The ground and the paved court around it looked an odd color. After a minute he realized he was looking at neither ground nor paving, but a close-packed mass of people. And now he could hear more clearly the puzzling and unfamiliar echo. It was the subdued voice of a great crowd reciting solemnly together. He could not make out the words at all, but the peculiar rhythm struck hauntingly on his memory as though he had heard it before in some totally different context.

Whatever it was, it was upset-

ting. Apart from the amazon societies and some obscure colleges of priest-scientists, nobody bothered much with the temples. Esha was an old world. Whatever of the primitive there was about her was only the regression to simplicity of a people who had tried every manner of complication and worn them out. She had exhausted faith and scientific research at about the same time, so that these two bitter enemies had finally made peace and joined together in a desperate attempt to save themselves from oblivion. They were still alive, but that was about all.

Now, for the first time, most of the people of Khar-esha were packed into the sacred precinct of the Helix, going through some solemn rite. They were angry, and afraid. Barron could hear it in their voices, feel it in the tight silence of the city. Something had happened, something deeply shocking to these normally light-hearted, indolent people.

He knew without any doubt that if they caught him they would kill him. And he began to wonder if what he had set out to do was possible.

If even his best and oldest friends, his foster-family, would still receive him.

He had a sudden overwhelming desire to run back to the skiff and take off. But he could not see what

he would do after that, and so he went furtively down the other side of the hill instead.

And came within a hair's breadth of running into a party of black-clad amazons marching along toward the temple with a prisoner. Barron got a fleeting glimpse of him—an Earthman of the type that can be found on any world at all that has an oxygen atmosphere and gutters. This one had been around for a year or so. Now his hands were bound and blood ran down his face. Two of the women were holding him up. His eyes shone large and glassy in the torchlight. He looked like a man already dead.

Barron lay flat on his belly behind a wall until they were gone. Then he went on, running like a cat through dark lanes.

The house was unlighted when he came to it. Perhaps they, too, were all at the temple. He hoped not, because he would have to wait for them and every minute he stayed in Khar-esh made just that more chance of being caught. He went through the back gate and through the garden, sweet-smelling with masses of flowers pale under the glowing sky, up to the low door.

He listened for a moment with his ear against the cool plastic panel. He could hear nothing. He rapped lightly with his knuckles,

but there was no answer. Exercising his rights as a foster-son, he opened the door and stepped quickly inside, closing it behind him.

THE ROOM WAS DARK. All the shutters were closed, so that not even the sky-glow filtered through. Barron spoke, and then for the first time he thought he heard a sound from somewhere deeper in the house. He went toward it.

"Shakhi?" he said. "Father?"

A tiny light sprang up, a spark close-held in the darkness of a shuttered room. It illumined the face of Shakhi, standing just beyond the doorway. An old face. Older than Barron remembered, the features made to look almost fleshless by the pinching and drawing-in of emotional strain. But the white crest was as thick and defiant as ever, the blue eyes as keen.

"Sam," he said. "I prayed you wouldn't come, but I knew you would." He drew him into the room — a sleeping room, where heavy curtains were drawn over the windows in addition to the shutters. "The others are at the temple. I pleaded sick, and stayed behind. Sam, there is bad trouble. In all my life I have not seen any like it."

Barron said, "What is it? What happened?"

Shakhi sat down, still holding

the tiny flame cupped in his hands. He wore a garment of white silk and the room smelled sweet as the garden outside, and as fresh. Barron sat down on a carved stool at his side. The silence, inside the house and out, made his nerves jump and his flesh crawl. The only sound was that distant chanting.

Shakhi said, "One of the sacred women of the Helix has been taken by an Earthman."

Barron stared at him. "One of the amazons? I'll admit it's surprising but —"

"No." The old man shook his head. "An amazon —" He shrugged. "Her sisters would have wished to tear her to pieces, perhaps, but it would not have set the whole world crazy. No. This woman was a full initiate — one of the Seven Keepers."

Now, for the first time, Barron began to understand, at least partly. He knew that such religion as there was on Esha centered around the so-called sacred knowledge handed down from past ages — most of it, actually, not sacred at all in nature but scientific. There was a sanctuary on a plateau far to the east, where what had anciently been a college was now The College, most hallowed spot on Esha and the home of the Seven Keepers — a batch of semi-legendary women who traditionally guarded some secret far two awe-

some and powerful to be trusted to any but the initiate. He had never thought much about the whole business one way or another, and he doubted if many others had either. But he could understand why the defection of one of the Sacred Seven with all her secret knowledge might upset them badly.

But not this much. Not enough to start a holy war against all Earthmen. Not enough to frighten a whole population back into its lost religion. Certainly not enough to bar shut every port in the Pleiades.

He said so.

Shakhi looked at him. He looked so grave and strange that Barron hardly knew him.

"There is more to it than you know," he said. "The Seven are not merely ritual priestesses. They do, actually and in fact, possess a very great and dreadful power. That much I know, because in the past there has been a Keeper in my own family. And now the ports of the Pleiades are shut against all Earthmen because they do not know which one Earthman may now have that power, and they do not want it loosed upon their worlds."

"What power?" asked Barron, still not believing that anything could be that frightening.

Shakhi said simply, "The power of creation. Not children, Sam. No.

These women deny themselves that, to keep their minds clear of distraction. No, not children. Matter."

Barron repeated stupidly, as though he had never heard the word before, "*Matter?*"

"Matter. Out of energy, with their own minds and the help of a machine. Our people were scientists in their time, Sam. We have lost interest and forgotten, but their knowledge is as true now as it ever was. The Seven Keepers have preserved this part of it, this most dangerous and important part, against a time when we may need it for our own survival."

"I see," Barron said. "Yes, I see."

The creation of matter out of energy, by the power of a trained mind linked with or strengthened by some kind of a machine. The man who controlled a secret like that could be a god, or a demon, or the richest man in the Galaxy. Or all three.

"Who is he? The Earthman, I mean. Or does anybody know?"

"Oh, yes, they know. That is why your life is in particular danger, Sam — why even we must move carefully because you were our foster-son. It's an old friend of yours, the Earthman with the fire-colored hair. DeWalt."

"Red DeWalt!" Barron sprang up and began to stride about the room. Suddenly he was furious. "Why, damn it, I was feeling sorry

for him just a little while ago, up there. So it was Red, was it? So all this is his fault. And I was the one that made him welcome here."

"He has ill repaid your hospitality," said Shakhi.

"Red DeWalt," Barron said again. And then there was silence, underlined by the sound of chanting coming distantly from the temple hill.

Barron turned and stood before Shakhi, looking down.

"Suppose I find DeWalt and this woman," he said. "Suppose I bring her back."

Shakhi nodded, over the small flame. "That is what you must do," he said, "or else you must leave the Pleiades forever."

"I'll find them," Barron said.

Shakhi blew out the flame. He stood up, his silken garment rustling softly. He said, "DeWalt will not easily give up the woman."

"He'll give her up," Barron said grimly.

"There is one other thing you should know. The woman was not taken by force, Sam. She went of her own free will."

"That," Barron admitted, "may complicate things."

"The initiates are not given much choice," Shakhi said. "The College picks them for certain powers of the mind, whether they wish it or not. Most of them consider it a high honor, but I imagine a

young and lovely woman might well long for a less important but more enjoyable life. This one is young, and is said to be lovely."

Barron grunted. He started along the hall toward the back door. "I don't suppose there's any hint of where DeWalt took her."

"No. Nowhere in the Pleiades, however — that is certain. My own guess would be somewhere among the Companions."

"That would be my guess too, knowing Red. He's been there before." The Companions were an anomalous rag-tag of stars outside the Pleiades, moving in the same direction and having the same speed, but not part of the group proper. Barron had been there, too. People went to the Companions the way people on Earth long ago had gone to several well-known places, for no good.

He felt for Shakhi's hand in the dark and gripped it. Then cautiously he opened the door.

Everything was as dark and quiet as it had been. He made his way to the gate and stepped through it into the narrow back lane.

Someone came running full tilt into him from around a bend. And from somewhere not far behind him there rose a sudden clamor of female voices, sharp and cruel as the voices of wolves.

BARRON CAUGHT the shad-
owy figure in his arms and
stifled its startled cry with a rough
hand.

"Quiet," he whispered fiercely,
and raised his fist to strike.

"Sam," said the figure, panting
and wriggling in his grasp. "It's
me. Ybra."

"Good Lord," said Barron, and
let him go. Ybra was his foster-
brother, Shakhi's youngest, and
younger than himself by ten years.
"I thought you were at the tem-
ple."

"I sneaked away. We knew you
might come tonight, and I wanted
to wait with Shakhi, but they made
me go — The amazons, Sam. I
think they're following me. Listen!"

The female voices were howling
again, closer at hand. Barron gave
Ybra a desperate push toward his
gate.

"Get on in. If they see you with
me —"

But Ybra said, "You know what
happened? Are you going to try to
find DeWalt?"

"Yes. Now will you go?"

"I know where he is. I heard
tonight at the temple. Everybody
seems sure of it. That's why I
came back. I thought if you —"

"Where, boy? Where?"

"One of the pleasure worlds in
the Companions. The woman —"

Barron motioned him to silence.
Now, quite plainly, he could hear

the swift trampling of sandal-shod feet in the dust of the lane. At the same time, abruptly, there were shrill cries from the wider street at the front of the house. The amazons had split into two parties.

"No one was supposed to leave the temple until it was all over," Ybra whispered. "I thought I could get away, but the streets are crawling with the Black Ones. I don't think they know who I am."

"Good," said Barron. "This way, over the wall."

They vaulted the low wall into a neighboring garden and crouched there, hugging the shadows. Not a bare second later the amazons passed by in the lane, making hungry noises as they went. Barron shivered. The amazon societies were few and small in numbers, and in ordinary times people looked upon them with the amused scorn of the normal for the professionally queer. But they were highly trained and fanatically dedicated, and for probably the first time in their lives they were running unrestrained, holy assassins glorying in the *jihad*.

He waited until the sound of their voices had receded to what he considered a safe distance. Then he whispered to Ybra,

"Go now. And thanks."

"I want to go with you, Sam. Let me?"

"What would Shakhi say to me if I got you killed?" He gave

Ybra's shoulder an affectionate shake. "Go on now, quick, before they come back."

Too proud to beg, Ybra said coldly, "The woman's name is Laryl. Perhaps that will help you locate them. Good bye."

He crept past Barron to the gate and opened it silently, and then darted out into the lane.

A savage, piercing cry transfixed him. Barron leaped up and looked over the wall. The amazons, at fault, had turned and one of them had run far enough on the back track to catch sight of Ybra. Instantly the boy spun around and came rushing back. Barron caught a glimpse of his face in the sky-glow. He was scared, but he was grinning.

"You've got to take me along now, Sam," he said.

Barron did not even try to argue with him. It was obviously impossible for the boy to get home now, and it was better for them to stay together than for Ybra to be alone. From the sound of their voices, Barron judged that the amazons had lost whatever original intention they had had of mere arrest, and were now only interested in catching their prey.

Barron said, "Come on!" and ran through the garden, with Ybra close on his heels.

THHEY PASSED the house, as lightless and silent as Shakhi's

had been. Barron knew the family that lived here. He wondered if they were at the temple, or if they were hiding behind the shuttered windows, listening and afraid. He did not stop to find out. The amazons were in full cry now behind them. He vaulted the low front wall and crossed the wider lane, or street, and vaulted another wall there into another garden. But it was useless to continue in a straight line. He veered sharply to the right.

"North," he panted. "To the river. Maybe these harpies can't swim."

Ybra laughed silently, like a child excited by a game. He ran close to Barron, scaling the garden walls with the ease of one still fresh from orchard-raiding. Behind them in the night the amazons screamed like eagles.

The houses began to thin out. There were marshes here beside the river, unhealthy and often flooded. There was a strong wet smell of mud and pungent grasses and decay. Clumps of reed-like trees with amphibious, humped-up roots, dotted the pools and twisting waterways. Barron and Ybra fled across the marsh, splashing and floundering, and thousands of startled birds rose up out of their sleep, flapping heavily in confused and screaming clouds. The voices of the amazons were lost in the din. Once more Ybra laughed.

"The birds will help us," he said. "I think we're safe now."

Barron only grunted and ran the harder. The river water received him, startlingly cold on his overheated body. He plunged into it and swam and then lay quiet and let the current take him. Ybra floated easily beside him, on his back, so that his white crest should not make a target from the shore.

From among the wheeling clouds of birds came a scattering of sharp sounds, followed by small random explosions in the water. Then the current bore them away. It became quieter. Barron rid himself of his light boots. The water was beginning to feel warm now and its gurgling rush was pleasant. The sky overhead was still bright, wrapped in its clouds of misty light as yet unpaled by dawn. He calculated how far the river should carry them, and how long it would take to reach the space-skiff, approaching the granite ledges from the other side. He figured that they should get there before daylight.

Ybra would certainly have to come with him now, all the way. The amazons must have seen the two of them together, and even by night they would be able to identify him as an Earthman. They boy's life would not be worth a counterfeit credit if he went back now.

"I could wish," he said, "that you'd kept your valuable informa-

tion to yourself."

Ybra chuckled and rolled in the water, shaking his white crest. "I've always wanted to go to space. Now I shall."

"Young whelp," said Barron, and the river took them, warm and gentle as a mother, on its curving way.

Ybra touched Barron's shoulder and pointed up. Both of them sank lower in the water. The temple hill rose above them, some distance back from the river, crowned with the great golden Helix and ablaze with the shaking light of many torches. Barron could see clearly from here the packed masses of people around it, like a horde of white-crested ants, disturbed by waves of motion as heads were bowed or bodies bent in unison, swirling slowly with the unceasing rhythm of even a stationary crowd. The sound of the chanting came very strong and clear, borne across the water.

Less a chant than a solemn recitation. And suddenly now Barron remembered where he had heard phrases of that particular shape and rhythm before. He had been sent to school for three hateful years on one of Vega's many worlds, to acquire the science his father had not been able to teach him. The people on the hill were reciting mathematical formulae.

He started to laugh. And then somehow it did not seem particular-

ly funny. Perhaps this was because he remembered the amazons.

The current swept them around the bend and the high hill was shut from view. When Barron guessed that they were opposite the ledges he swam ashore with Ybra and set off through the woods. The blue dawn caught them after all before they reached the space-skiff, and Barron was in a panic lest the amazons might have thought to search the woods, and be waiting for them. But the skiff was there just as he had left it, apparently undisturbed. He hustled Ybra aboard and took off, and did not stop to catch breath or dry himself until he was in open space and heading for STARLADY. The Eshans had a few old ships and a handful of pilots, but he doubted whether any pursuit would be mounted.

He looked at Ybra, who was watching entranced as his world dropped away from him.

"There seems to have been a lot of gossip going around the temple last night. Did you hear anything else?"

"Like what?"

"Like what The College intends to do."

YBRA TURNED from the port, frowning. "Khar-esh is full of rumors, Sam. I've heard that a shipload of priests and amazons

from The College is already heading toward the Companions. I've heard that The College has hired an outsider, a stranger, to go after DeWalt and the woman. A man from Altair, I think. I've heard that a whole fleet is to be sent out to exterminate all the Earthmen in the Pleiades. I've heard that the terrible power of the woman is going to destroy anybody who goes after her, and probably this whole part of space as well. I don't think any of these rumors are true."

"And yet," said Barron, "The College has lost something it can't afford to lose. It's bound to do something. And who knows what the woman might be able to do, with what she's got?"

Ybra ran his fingers through his thick crest, its whiteness contrasting strongly with his bronzed young skin.

"I know one thing," he said. "Whoever goes after the woman and brings her back, if it isn't you it won't matter. Earthmen will still be barred from the Pleiades. You can never come home."

And Barron knew that that was true.

"Somewhere in the Companions," he said slowly. "Well, I've got one advantage. I know Red DeWalt. I might be able to guess a little better than anyone else where exactly in the Companions he might

be. I might be able to get there first."

He began to figure, not the probable whereabouts of DeWalt but the amount of fuel he had in STAR-LADY'S bunkers and the distance to the Companions expressed in terms of the consumption of that fuel. He thought he could just make it.

And of course he could refuel there. The Companions had obviously not joined the Pleiad boycott, any more than they had ever joined anything else. They were strictly for themselves.

"Pahlia," said Barron suddenly. "I'll lay you odds that's where he is."

Eagerly, Ybra said, "Are you sure?"

"No. How could I be sure? But he told me once that Pahlia was the only world he knew where you could buy anything if you had the money, sell anything if you had the merchandise, and do anything if you had the strength. Think a minute. Nobody would bother him there. He could take his time figuring out how he's going to use this knowledge the woman has, and then he'd be able to arrange almost any kind of a deal he wanted right there, because that's the kind of a place Pahlia is."

He might, Barron thought, just be kidding himself, but he was sure he was right. Anyway, it gave him

a place to start.

He would have been happier if he had been sure what The College was going to do. But on that he could only wait and see.

About Red DeWalt he tried just not to think at all. Red had been his friend for years, and he did not like to speculate on what their relationship was going to be now. He doubted that Red had any realization of what he had done, or the effect it was having on others. That was one trouble with Red—he never took anything seriously except having fun and making money. For both reasons he was liable to take the woman Laryl very seriously indeed. And Red could be hell on wheels when he got started.

He shook his head at Ybra and sighed, "I wish you'd stayed home."

And Ybra grinned and said, "Before you're through, you may be glad I didn't."

Less than an hour later STARLADY winked out of normal space and into overdrive, on the way to Pahlia.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS A WEIRD and wonderful world, Pahlia. It circled an orange-yellow sun and by day the sky was a burnished gold, darkening to umber when storm-clouds rose. By night the misty Pleiades

hung in radiant clouds against the blackness. Much nearer, the famous Crystal Moon shone brighter than any star.

Day or night, it made no difference on Pahlia. Her business went on uninterrupted. Her cities rose in fantastic towers, glittering all night long with lights, or spread in rambling secluded suburbs among exotic trees. You could have what you wanted on Pahlia. All you had to do was imagine it, ask for it, and pay. In advance.

"A hell of a place," said Joe Lucich sourly, "to be broke in."

"It's just as well," Barron retorted. "We're not here for fun, remember?"

"It looks to me," said Lucich, "as though we're not here for anything. Five days now, and where's DeWalt? I thought you were so sure."

"Five days," said Barron mildly, "is not much time in which to search a whole world."

He had the old familiar impulse to clout Lucich, but he didn't. Neither did he admit that he was beginning to think they had drawn a blank. Not even to himself.

They were not looking, at this stage of the game, for a man and a woman. They were looking for a ship. There were seven starports on Pahlia. STARLADY lounged at her dock in one of them, her bunkers comfortably full again and part of

her cargo mortgaged to pay for it. Barron's assets, such as they were, were out of his reach on Esha. The remainder of the borrowed money was taking Barron, Lucich and Ybra on a tour of the other ports, checking to see if DeWalt's VAGABOND was or had been in any of them.

They had one more starport to go.

Ybra was irritatingly unworried. He looked out the window of the public flier at a sparkling inland sea like a sheet of gold beneath them and said, "If he's not there, we'll go on to another world, won't we?"

"Yes," said Barron. "Sure. As long as our cargo holds out. And in the meantime, of course, somebody from The College may have found them already."

Ybra pointed suddenly through the window. "What are those?"

A cluster of shining domes rose out of the shallow sea, glittering like diamonds where the sun struck them.

"People," said Joe Lucich bitterly, "go down into those places to have a good time."

"But what do they *do* in them?"

"Music," said Lucich. "Drinks. Beautiful dames. All kinds of entertainment."

"How would you know?" Barron demanded. "You ever been there?"

"No," said Lucich. "And it don't look like I ever will."

The flier swept over a curving beach dotted with pavilions and rimmed with buildings of exotic design. Even from this height the place reeked of expense and a sort of calculated abandon that struck Barron as essentially phony. He had never cared much for these pleasure worlds, not because he was either stingy or prudish, but because they seemed to be full of people grimly determined to have the devil and all of a time, catered to by groups of hard-eyed men who supplied amusements with the cold efficiency of so many machines. Perhaps it was only because he wasn't geared to this high-powered stuff, but Barron had had better times for a lot less money in a number of places he could think of.

Several miles from the sea the flier dropped swiftly to a landing field for small craft adjacent to the starport. The passengers debarked and Barron headed toward the Port Authority building — quite different from the one on Esha, approximately five hundred times as big and five thousand times as busy. Lucich and Ybra trailed a little behind him, looking around. Barron became aware again of the demoralizing effect of Pahlia's light gravity and over-oxygenated air. The sun was hot, pleasantly so. Trees and flowering vines in the

most improbable colors did some restrained rioting wherever there was room for them. It crossed his mind that this must have been a lovely world before commercialism came.

THEY ENTERED the tall white pylon of Port Authority and went into Registry. There were private landing-fields on all the pleasure worlds, owned by wealthy persons or corporations and used by such of their friends and associates as wished to come and go anonymously. These were beyond Barron's reach, but Red DeWalt didn't have that kind of connections. And if he had landed at any of the regular ports, his ship would be registered.

He fed the information into one of the robot clerks and waited while it searched its cavernous files. Registry was a large round room with no windows and only one door. The circular wall was a continuous panel, blinking erratically with many lights as relays linked the memory circuits behind it.

It took the robot a minute or two. While Barron and the others waited, a man came into the room. He was a very tall, very slim man in a close-fitting suit of dark silk that did not advertise either his world of origin or his occupation. He had a narrow high-boned face

and a narrow skull with the black hair cropped short on it. His eyes were a brilliant and striking shade of topaz. They should have been warm eyes, Barron thought, like their color, but they were not. They were cold, dispassionate, and keen as steel.

They went over Barron and Lucich, flick, flick, seeing everything, and passing on. They flicked over Ybra, brightened suddenly with almost startled interest, looked again at the boy's white crest, flicked back to Barron and Lucich for a second glance, and then were quickly veiled. The man walked to another of the robot clerks and began unhurriedly to punch keys.

For no reason at all, Barron's hair bristled at the back of his neck. He found himself standing tense and poised as one in the presence of an enemy.

Neither Lucich nor Ybra apparently had noticed anything about the man. They were waiting for the robot to answer.

It did. VAGABOND, Merope, Harley DeWalt owner and master, was registered and still docked.

Ybra gave a cry. "He is here, then!"

"Yeah," said Barron, and ripped the sheet out of the slot. "Let's go."

"What's wrong with you?" asked Lucich. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Sure," said Barron, and glared at both Lucich and Ybra. "Let's go!"

He strode out the door. The tall slim man remained at his place, not looking around, as though indifferent to what they did.

Outside, Barron explained.

"He recognized you for an Eshan, Ybra. The crest of a male Eshan is unmistakable. And it gave him a definite reaction. Now why should that be?"

"I don't know. I've never seen the man before, so it couldn't be—"

"Didn't you tell me," Barron said, "that there was a rumor around that The College had hired a man to come after DeWalt?"

"Yes, there was. A man from Altair."

"Joe," said Barron to Lucich, "you've been to Altair. Did he look like anybody on those worlds?"

Lucich thought about it. "There's a lot of bean-pole types there, all right. I think they come from the fourth planet. But I don't know, Sam. I didn't look too close at this guy."

"Look again," said Ybra quietly. "There he comes out of the building."

The tall slim man emerged into the sunlight and walked without hesitation in the opposite direction. He did not so much as glance at them.

"Could be," Lucich said, and shrugged. "But there's a lot of tall skinny guys in the galaxy, you know, and they don't all come from Altair."

"I think," said Barron, "that this one did, and I think he's a professional killer. And I think we'd better polish up our luck and find DeWalt in a hurry."

"Well," said Lucich, "where do we go from here?"

Barron scowled at the sheet the robot had given him. "To the dock and have a look around—there's just a chance Red may be living aboard VAGABOND. He's done that before, on the grounds that a man's a fool to waste money on a place to sleep, and around here even the cots have diamond-studded headboards. If he's not there, we'll start at the hotels."

He looked once again after the tall slim man, but he was out of sight now and it was impossible to tell which way he had gone.

THEY WENT BACK into the Port Authority building and took the lift down to the subway rotunda.

Here they were not alone. Crowds of people from all over this sector of space pushed and laughed and chattered—some of them just coming in, others about to leave and escorted by groups of friends, a certain number of them going to

and from the ships on which they were living. Men and women of every size, shape and color, a bright kaleidoscope of gaudy silks and fluttering draperies, bare flesh, glittering teeth, glassy eyes, ornaments. Everybody joyous, everybody having fun. Ybra stared, his own eyes shining with excitement. Lucich stared too, mostly at the women.

Checking the code number of the dock, Barron found the trunk tube they wanted and stepped onto the swiftly moving walkway. The tubes ran deep under the landing-field, but even down here you could feel the shock and hear the dim thunder as some starship landed or took off.

From the main trunk smaller tubes branched off, serving the individual rows of docks. The segment of crowd that had accompanied them thinned out as the branch tubes bled them off. The sound of laughter and bright talk dwindled and finally died. Twenty people, looking jaded and worn in the harsh light, became sixteen and then seven and then four, and finally the last group vanished, still quarreling mildly over where they would go for the night's entertainment.

When Barron and the others switched onto a branch themselves, they were quite alone.

The mechanism of the walkway

throbbed and whispered faintly in the enclosed space. Barron kept thinking it sounded like footsteps. He kept looking back down the tunnel, but he didn't see anyone. The lighted landings passed by at regular intervals, numbered like the docks. The landings ran clear through to the inbound tunnel and sometimes there were people on the far side getting on the walkway, heading for the gilded palaces of sin beside the inland sea. Bursts of talk and laughter came and were quickly lost again. Still Barron kept glancing uneasily back. And still he could not see anyone behind them.

"You make me nervous," Lucich said.

"Good," said Barron. "Maybe it'll help you keep your mind on your work."

They passed the landing next to VAGABOND's. It was empty. But for the first time Barron noticed that there was a place behind the lift-shaft that you couldn't see. There was no reason why that should have bothered him. It did.

VAGABOND's landing showed ahead, a brightly lighted square of white concrete.

Barron stepped out on it. And as he did so, something moved. Something swiftly completing the act of disappearing into that very blind spot behind the lift-shaft that Barron had noticed before.

He sprang toward it, rushing over the concrete. He flung himself around the curve of the shaft and onto the person who stood there. At the last second when it was far too late to stop, it occurred to him that if the person was the tall killer from Altair this was not a very bright thing to do. He reached out his hands and caught the person by the arms, and it was not the tall killer from Altair.

It was a woman, a young woman. Very young. Tall, but no taller than a woman should be, which was to say just tall enough to give her curves plenty of room to be full without crowding. She wore a shimmering concoction of jade-green tissue that did not quite hide all the pearly lustre of the flesh it covered. Her eyes were blue and wide and frightened.

And her hair was red.

The hair of the runaway Eshan Keeper should have been snow-colored like Ybra's, long and soft instead of crested, but still white.

Barron, considerably confused, heard Lucich and Ybra running up behind him. He looked at the girl, who could not have come from anywhere but VAGABOND, and she looked up at him, tense as a drawn bow between his hands.

"Who are you?" he asked.

In a small flat voice she answered, "I am Laura DeWalt. Harley DeWalt's sister."

Suddenly all the confusion was gone and Barron began to laugh.

"Red DeWalt never had a sister," he said. "And of course your hair isn't white, you've dyed it."

His hands tightened a little on her round arms.

"Your name is Laryl."

CHAPTER V

THE WALKWAYS, one on either side of them, drummed and hummed. Barron could feel Ybra and Lucich breathing down the back of his neck, and Lucich said,

"Is that her?"

The girl's face was now pale and stiff with panic.

"Let go of me," she said. "I don't know you. You haven't any right to—"

She began to struggle against him. Then for the first time, looking past him, she saw Ybra. For one moment she stopped absolutely still and Barron could feel her heart pounding. Then she cried out something that sounded like, "No, no!" and lunged so quickly that she slipped out of his grasp. She ran like a deer across the platform and onto the inbound walkway.

Barron shouted after her, to wait. He ran to the walkway. But she was already some little distance away from him, carried by

the swift-moving belt. She turned to look back at him, her eyes blazing, her red lips pulled back to show the edges of her teeth.

She screamed at him in Eshan, "I won't go back. You can't make me. Nobody can make me!"

She whirled around and ran, adding her speed to the moving walk, her hair and the thin green stuff of her gown flying behind her.

Barron ran, too. The tunnel was empty for the moment as far as he could see ahead, but people might come into it at any time, and he wanted to catch up with Laryl before that happened. Even on Pahlia the sight of three men subduing a screaming girl would attract attention. Lucich and Ybra ran with him. Ybra had not said anything. Apparently he was caught speechless between awe and surprise. But Lucich was never speechless.

"I don't blame her," he said. "What a crime to waste all that in a place where there's nothing but a bunch of women and dried-up priests!"

Ybra finally found his tongue. "I didn't know the Keepers ever looked like that."

"I guess they're not picked for anything but their minds," Barron said, and realized all of a sudden what a terrible and awesome power this beautiful soft-fleshed girl possessed.

It turned him cold all over and made him falter in his stride. Suppose she turned it on them? She could destroy anything with it, men, planets, stars, anything.

Then he remembered that Shakhi had said that the mind required the help of some kind of a machine. Perhaps the Keepers were powerless without the machines. Certainly the girl did not seem to have thought of anything but flight.

There was something else, too. She did not fit the picture he had had of her at all. Shakhi had described her as young and lovely and so he had thought of her that way, but also he had thought of her as proud and austere and frighteningly brilliant, vested with the authority of a superhuman power. This girl wasn't any of those things.

She had wonderful legs, though. And the motion of her running was something to watch.

The next landing swept toward them. The girl was no more than twenty feet away. Barron figured that he would catch her easily in the next couple of minutes.

A man appeared on the landing. A tall slim man in a dark suit. He stepped off onto the moving walk just ahead of Laryl.

Laryl cried out, "Help me, please help me, those men—"

He reached out one long arm and threw it around her in a ges-

ture that was intended to appear protective. With the other he produced a gun. Barron and the others stopped running.

"When you reach the landing," the man said, in a soft and pleasant voice, "step onto it. And stay there until we are out of sight."

The belt thrummed, whisking them nearer and nearer to the landing. Barron looked at the tall man. It was obvious now that he had followed them, hiding here on the next landing to see what they would do. And Laryl had dropped right into his hands.

Barron said quietly, to Ybra and Lucich, "There's no need to get off. He isn't going to shoot us."

"How do you know," Lucich demanded, and the man from Altair echoed, smiling,

"Yes. How can you be so sure?"

"Because none of us is the man you came for, and the excitement aroused by three bodies might impede you from getting at him." His glance moved to Laryl, panting in the circle of the man's long arm. "There is also the girl."

"Yes," said the man, and nodded. "I admire intelligence. I hope yours is great enough to take you away from Pahlia—in fact, from the whole Pleiades."

THE THING HAPPENED then that Barron had been sure would happen at any minute. A

group of people came out onto the landing beyond the one they had just passed. Instantly the tall man let his gun slip out of sight. He began to walk away from Barron and the others, holding the girl gently by the elbow. Over his shoulder he said,

"I might remind *you* that the bosses here rather frown on disturbances. They don't like anything that upsets the paying guests."

Then he bent his head and spoke to Laryl and smiled, and she smiled, and they hurried on together. The group of people on the platform, perhaps a dozen of them, began to step off onto the walkway. Laryl and the tall man became mixed with them. By the time Barron had caught up the whole dozen were between him and the couple. He thought he could see the Altairan's head towering beyond them and he pushed and shoved his way between the people, slim bluish sprites from one of Alcyone's worlds who reproached him shrilly for his bad manners. Lucich and the boy came doggedly behind him.

When he had managed to get through the group he saw the flutter of Laryl's green gown far ahead, and then lost it as other people intervened. He did his best to catch up to it, and just before the branch joined the main trunk he did see it again. After that it was hopeless. There were too many

people. But he kept working his way forward as fast as he could, stolidly ignoring the wrath he aroused in the folk he jostled.

"If we can pick them up again in the main terminal we're all right," he said. "Otherwise we might as well buy a wreath for DeWalt and go away."

"Why didn't you tell her the man was after her and DeWalt?" said Lucich. "She might of not been so easy for him to handle."

"Suppose I told her," Barron said. "Either she wouldn't believe me, or if she did, he'd have shot us and gotten her away, figuring he could always get DeWalt later. She's the most important part of the deal, you know. This way I hoped he'd figure to lose us and let her take him right to DeWalt."

"It looks like what he's doing, all right."

"What if we can't find them again at the terminal?" asked Ybra unhappily. "I don't care about DeWalt. All this is his fault, anyway. But the woman —"

"If we lose we lose," said Barron curtly. "Come on."

Laughter, chattering voices, movement, color. Faces of every shade from ebon and plump-purple to ash-white and silver, turning to glare at him. The tops of heads, the backs of them, necks, breasts, chests, arms, shoulders, bodies thick and thin, short and tall. The

smell of different peoples like a blend of spices, piquant and a little overpowering. Barron was glad when they reached the terminal. It seemed to him that he had spent years struggling in a sticky river of galactic humanity.

"There she is!" cried Ybra. "See? Just getting into the lift there."

A flutter of green, a glint of red hair. Then the door closed. Barron put his shoulder down and butted through the crowd, with Lucich and Ybra at his sides forming a wedge. They forced their way into another lift. When it reached ground level Laryl and the man from Altair were already out of sight. Barron ran across the lobby and through the broad exit into the glare of the setting sun outside.

Laryl and the Altairan were getting into a 'copter-cab some fifty feet away. Their backs were turned. Barron retreated quickly into the shadow of the exit, motioning Lucich and the boy to stay out of sight. He watched the cab lift off, and he could see the pale blur of the Altairan's face behind the window as he looked back to see whether Barron had followed them. The cab was bright blue with silver markings. It rose up, hovered a moment while the Altairan apparently took a good long look, and then veered away toward the city.

A vast sense of relief came over

Barron. The man was going after DeWalt, making the girl help him. He had been afraid that he might think better of it and make sure of the girl by taking her back to Esha at once.

Ybra was tugging at him impatiently. "If you don't hurry there won't be a cab left. Look at that mob."

"We're not taking a cab. He's not that careless. He'll take some pains to make sure he isn't being followed, and I want him to be certain he's lost us." Barron pointed to the terminus of the high-speed elevated tube that connected the spaceport with the city. The top and sides of the tube were of glassite, so that the passengers might enjoy the superb view. "We'll ride that. We ought to be able to keep him in sight."

No easy task. But not impossible. Cab and tube both went in the same direction and at about the same rate of speed.

The blue cab was now far enough away for figures on the ground to be unrecognizable from it. Barron moved fast, heading for the tube.

There was no jostling, no running ahead on this express belt. Padded rests caught and held the passenger in pneumatic comfort and safety while the belt rushed smoothly forward. The transparent curve of the tube showed the space-

port on one side, huge and impressive with its rows of towering starships all catching the sunset on one side. From the landing field farther out a tender-crane as big as an apartment-house was trundling a pleasure craft toward its assigned dock. On the other side were trees and pleasant villas, and in the distance the golden sea flashing like hot metal.

In the sky above was a blue cab with silver markings. There were other cabs too, all moving in a stream toward the city. But with three of them to watch, it proved not too difficult to keep the right one in sight.

Until they reached the city. Then they left it behind, slowed by increasingly heavy traffic while the tube-belt rushed on unimpeded.

They got off the belt at the first platform. Here they were on the edge of the inland sea, with the pale beaches stretching in both directions. Far out in the bright water the pleasure-domes flashed in the eye of the sinking sun.

Desperately Barron scanned the sky above for the blue cab. If they lost it now probably both DeWalt and the girl would be lost, and the Pleiades would be closed to him forever.

He watched, and it came, drumming down out of the sky as though it knew what was decreed for it. It dropped onto a landing-field

from whence the boats left for the pleasure domes. From where he stood on the high platform Barron could see the small figures of Laryl and the man from Altair get out of the cab and enter a boat.

"That's where DeWalt is," Barron said. "In the domes. Good. Let's go!"

He turned toward the lift shaft. And two men were there. They had got off the belt and had stood quietly admiring the view for a minute or two. Barron had hardly noticed them in his intentness on the cab. Now they stood between him and the lift and one of them said,

"Arrikon dislikes very much to be followed. That is our whole business in life—to see that no one follows him."

He smiled, a kind of mechanical movement of the lips with no humor in it. His companion did not even do that. And each one carried in his hand a needle-gun, a squat little instrument practically unnoticeable to anyone passing by, but as deadly as a cannon at short range if the steel projectiles hit a vital spot.

"Well," said Barron mildly, "in that case I guess we'll have to change our plans. Come on, boys."

He turned halfway around as though he was going to go back to the tube again, bent suddenly at the knees and flung himself

low at the two men.

CHAPTER VI

THEY WERE STANDING close together, so that the impact of his body staggered them both off balance. They were brought to face each other and so were momentarily afraid to shoot. Barron grabbed one around the hips and used him as a lever, kicking furiously at the other man.

He felt his boot sink deep into yielding flesh. There was a deep hollow gasping noise. Then Lucich and Ybra were on top of them. The man he was holding cursed and lost his footing, falling back against the smooth wall of the lift-shaft.

Barron fell with him. The needle-gun went *whick-whick-whick* close to his ear. He squirmed around and got his hands on the man's wrist. He pushed the gun up and twisted. Ybra was hitting the man around the head, strong awkward blows. The man was in a black rage. He kneed and kicked and floundered, beating Barron on the face with his free hand.

Barron tasted blood and there was now something wrong with his left shoulder. A thin hot wire had been strung through it, and his whole arm was weak. Still he hung on, twisting at the gun.

The man got his back against

the smooth wall and braced his feet and lunged upward. He gave Ybra the point of his elbow in the throat, knocking him out of the way. Then he began to hammer Barron across the back of the neck with the hard edge of his hand. Barron pulled his head down between his shoulders. He braced his own feet and butted. He drove the man back hard against the wall. He was angry. He was hurt and bloody and full of hate. He wanted to kill this man, and the other man, and Arrikon. After that, he wanted to kill Red DeWalt.

He butted. He had a broad hard head and he used it. He used his knees and feet. The man was not fighting so much now. Barron kept beating him against the smooth wall and presently he dropped the gun. Then Barron let go of his wrist and hit him clean blows with his fists. On the fourth one the man crumpled down and was quiet.

Barron stood back, breathing hard.

Lucich was sitting on the other man, who had been easy prey for him after Barron's kick in the belly. Barron glowered at Lucich.

"What the hell are you just sitting there for?" he demanded. "Why didn't you help?" He put his hand up to his shoulder, where a needle had gone through the muscle.

Lucich got up. "I'm saving my-

self," he said. "I'm probably going to want to run real fast before I'm through."

Barron grunted. Ybra was leaning against the wall with his hands on his bruised throat, and his mouth open. His eyes looked surprised and shocked. Barron said, "I told you to stay at home. Come on."

He helped the boy into the lift. Lucich stopped to pick up the gun of the man Barron had knocked out. He already had the other. Then he got into the lift too. They went down.

In the shadow of a clump of flowering trees they paused to clean up, using water from an ornamental pool. Lucich did the best he could with Barron's shoulder, which had already stopped bleeding and was now merely increasingly painful. The needles did not make a big hole, but you knew it all right when one went through you. Ybra had got his breath again but his voice was hoarse and now he looked mad, too, as mad as Barron felt. Barron grinned. He took one of the needle-guns from Lucich. Then they went to the shore and took a boat out to the domes.

It was full dark now and the wind over the water was cool. The Crystal Moon—Pahlia had no natural satellites—hung huge and brilliant in the sky.

Ybra looked up at it. "What do people do up there?"

"Same things they do in the domes," said Lucich. "Only it's fancier—no gravity, and all that."

Entry into the domes cost them a considerable part of what they had left in the way of money. From the upper lock they went down to the gallery that circled each one of the interconnecting domes. It was early but already the gallery and the floors below were crowded with people eating and drinking, gambling or watching the gambling. The domes were lighted from the outside, very cleverly, so that those within had the feeling of being genuinely under water. The gaming tanks were lighted, brightly, but otherwise the illumination was wavering and subdued so that people seemed to float in it. Various creatures of the sea, beautiful, grotesque, dark or vividly colored, hung around the domes and peered in curiously at the people, their eyes shining in the light.

Barron began to hunt for Red DeWalt.

THREE WAS NO SIGN of him, nor of Laryl and Arrikon, in the first of the domes, which was devoted to food and liquor. Knowing Red, Barron hurried on to where the gaming tanks were.

In a broad shallow tank equipped with jets a number of small

crustaceans, colored red and green and black, were demonstrating the theory of random distribution on a glass bottom marked off like a graph. A lot of people hung over the tank railing making bets, but Red was not one of them.

In the third and largest dome there was a tank the size of a large swimming pool. In it some beautiful but slightly repellent amphibian girls and some vaguely humanoid sea-things were doing something in the way of a competitive game. This seemed to be very popular. Red was not here, either.

The fourth dome was darker than the others. The illumination had a reddish tinge. The tank here was deeper and had a protective network of steel bars over it against the possibility of some drunk falling in. The crowd around it was almost entirely male. In the starkly brilliant waters of the tank two lean jut-jawed fish as big as bull-dogs, color-banded for easy identification, tore at each other with blind ferocity, surrounded by lacy patterns of drifting blood.

But not in this dome, either, was Red DeWalt to be found.

The fifth dome was closed. Curtains of metallic cloth hung over the entrance and a velvet-covered chain crossed it. A sign begged the indulgence of the customers while the dome was being renovated and redesigned for their great

enjoyment in the future.

The battle in the tank was reaching its climax. The bettors seemed more excited than the fish, which were killing each other. No one was paying any attention to Barron. He said quietly to Ybra, "You stay out here." He nodded to Lucich and took the needle-gun into his fist. Then he stepped over the velvet-covered chain and slid quickly between the curtains.

The dome beyond was not lighted, except by reflection from the other domes. Through its walls the sea floor was visible, set with waving clumps of reed in which dim creatures moved. There were all the signs of work on progress, dropped now and waiting for morning. The tank in the center was dry.

The girl Laryl sat on the floor amid a heap of unnamed objects gathered together and covered with protective cloths. Her attitude was curiously like that of a rag doll, limp and sprawled. She was watching, with no particular interest, the efforts of the man from Altair to break Red DeWalt's back over the railing of the tank.

Barron went forward in swift leaping strides.

Arrikon heard him and turned his head. In the faint light his eyes appeared filmed and pale, part of the pale intensity of his face. His long thin body was arched, his legs

locked over DeWalt's thighs, his long thin arms held straight under the hammer curve of his shoulders, his hands around DeWalt's neck, pushing. DeWalt was a strong man. He was not nearly as tall as Arrikon but he was thick and heavily-muscled. He did not break easily. But he was closer to it than Barron would have thought possible.

"Let him up," Barron said.

Arrikon regarded him from some strange inner distance and did not move.

"I have a needle-gun," Barron said, and held it out so that Arrikon could see it. "I took it away from your strong-arm man. I will give you one second to let go. After that I will shoot you in the spine."

Arrikon closed his eyes like a bird of prey and opened them again, and now the filmy look was gone and they were cold and cruel and alert. He took his hands away from DeWalt's neck and stepped aside. DeWalt slid heavily off the rail and down to the floor where he sat with his head against the railing and his chest heaving with a noise like sobbing. For the first time Barron noticed a knife on the floor near Arrikon's feet. DeWalt's collar was stained with blood below and behind the right ear. Arrikon had apparently slugged DeWalt preparatory to a quiet stabbing, but had underestimated the hard-

ness of DeWalt's skull.

Barron showed his teeth. "This hasn't exactly been your night, has it?" he said to Arrikon. He nodded toward the girl, who was still staring vaguely with idiot eyes. "What did you do, drug her?"

"It was advisable." Arrikon wiped the palms of his hands across his silk tunic and then let them rest on his hips. DeWalt, blowing like a whale, was trying to get his feet under him.

"Help him," Barron said to Lucich. "Out of the way. That's it. Now get some of that cordage there and tie this gentleman up. Tight."

He moved in a little closer. "From here I can shoot you in the face. I wouldn't try anything."

Arrikon shrugged. He put his hands behind him and let Lucich tie them.

"It's a long way to Esha," he said. "In fact, it's a long way just from here to your ships. Longer than you know. I can wait."

Lucich tied him to the rail and shoved a gag in his mouth. "That'll hold him for a while," he said. Barron nodded. He turned to DeWalt, who was now standing up and moving his head carefully back and forth. Barron reached out and got hold of the front of DeWalt's tunic and looked darkly into his face.

"I ought to finish what he

started," Barron said. "Right here and now."

"What the devil for?" DeWalt said, staring at him. "What did I do? I wish somebody would tell me what's going on. First this so-and-so, and now you."

"You don't know?" Barron said. He pointed to the girl. "I don't suppose you know who she is, then."

"Her?" said DeWalt. "Sure. Those old creeps on Esha had her shut up in The College, but she didn't want to be a priestess so I took her with me. So what?"

Now it was Barron's turn to stare. "Didn't you know she was one of the Keepers?"

"Look," said DeWalt. "Here comes this cute chick, about the cutest I ever saw, and tells me she's where she hates it and she wants to go away with me. Do I argue? Do I ask her a lot of questions? Do I worry whether the Great High Mumbo Jumbo likes it or not? Would you?"

He shook Barron's hands away. "The hell with you. I need a drink."

"Wait a minute," said Barron. "Wait just a minute. Then you don't know why she's so important? Why The College hired this man to kill you because she's talked to you? Why every port in the Pleiades is closed to Earthmen because of her?"

"Every port is *what?*" said DeWalt.

"Closed. Shut. Barred. You can't go back. I can't go back. None of us can, because of you and your cute chick."

DeWalt shook his head. "You're kidding. Sam, this isn't any time for that. I've just almost been killed. I need a drink."

Barron began to laugh. He stopped it, looking at Arrikon's yellow eyes, alert and brilliant above the gag. "Let's go," he said to DeWalt. "I'll explain to you somewhere else."

Now DeWalt looked at Arrikon. "Next time," he said, "I'll know better than to turn my back on you." He bent over Laryl. He started to help her up and almost fell on her instead. "Drugged, huh? And he told me she was sick. That's how he got me here."

BARRON PUSHED him aside. He and Lucich took the girl between them and stood her up and began to walk her toward the door. DeWalt followed unsteadily. Arrikon remained motionless. Barron had a strong impulse to go back and kill him as a simple matter of safety, but he could not force himself to cold-blooded murder.

They rejoined Ybra and made their way back through the domes. Nobody paid much attention to

them. In the first dome DeWalt stopped at the bar and ordered a drink. Then he nodded toward Laryl, standing limp and vacant between the two men.

"One of your best snapper-outer," DeWalt said to the bartender. "She's had a bit too much of a time."

The bartender smiled, nodded, and produced a capsule and a small glass of pink liquid. "Give the lady this," he said, "and she'll dance all night."

While they were getting the stuff down Laryl's throat the two men they had fought with on the tube-platform entered the dome. Both of them looked the worse for wear. They saw Barron and his party and glared with the most vicious hostility, but that was all they did. Barron nodded to them and then got Laryl and DeWalt moving toward the port. He saw the two men move off through the domes, obviously looking for Arrikon.

It was only a question of a little time before they would find him. A sudden fever to get away, not only from the domes but from Pahlia itself, came over Barron. He hustled them all into a boat and was relieved when it pulled away from the landing.

"She's coming out of it," DeWalt said, holding Laryl's head so the cool wind would blow in her face.

"Look at her. Pretty as they make 'em. I wouldn't say she's weighed down any with brains, but with what else she's got she don't need 'em."

"No," said Barron, thinking of something DeWalt was not thinking about, "apparently she doesn't. Listen, Red. We'll go back to your VAGABOND and I'll radio Viji to bring STARLADY here. I've got to take this girl back to Esha myself, and I'd advise you to stay away from there. I—"

Laryl sneezed violently three times in quick succession, and then she said, "Esha. No. No, no!"

"Now, then," DeWalt said, patting her. "Take it easy, kid." He looked at Barron. "That's a devil of a thing to do, Sam. She doesn't want to go back and I sure don't want her to either. I don't see—"

"Listen," said Barron. "Do you want to go on living in the Pleiades? Do you want to go on trading there? Then she's got to go back. You committed about the biggest sacrilege you could and—"

Laryl stood up. She turned around and began to strike at Barron with her hands, crying hysterically, "I won't go back, I won't!"

Barron ducked to avoid a raking blow to the eye and Laryl overbalanced. The boat's side caught her at the knees. She toppled over towards the flying spray, and

screamed as she went.

Ybra caught her. For a moment the two of them hung on dead center, her weight against his braced strength. Then slowly he pulled her in. She collapsed onto the seat beside him and he said to Barron, shakily,

"I told you you'd be glad I came."

Laryl began to cry. She beat her hands up and down on her bare white knees and wailed. "Why does everything have to be against me? I just want to live a little and have fun. I don't want to be anybody important." Barron touched her shoulder and she yelled at him, "I'll die if I have to go back!"

"All right," said Barron soothingly, "we'll talk about it later. Maybe we can find some other way out. But the important thing now is to get away before Arrikon makes another try. You don't want Red to get killed, do you?"

Her eyes were wide and wet and dismal. "Arrikon? Who's that?"

"The tall man. The man who tried to kill Red back there in the dome."

"It was all fuzzy," she said. "I don't remember much. I thought he was helping me. Why does he want to kill Red?"

Barron explained, and she listened and then shrugged. "I don't

see what difference it makes to me who takes me back to Esha."

"I've got an idea," Barron told her, "that Arrikon was planning to take you to a place a lot worse for you than Esha. And anyway, it makes a difference to me. If I bring you back, Earthmen are vindicated and we can go on living and trading in the Pleiades. If not, we'll starve."

She muttered that she did not care who starved, and subsided into a deep sulk. She remained that way, saying nothing, sniffling now and then, her tear-swollen eyes half shut and brooding, all the way back to the spaceport and VAGABOND. They locked her in her cabin. Barron searched it first to make sure she did not have any weapon or any peculiar machine in it, but when he did finally leave her he did not feel easy about it. There was something ominous about her heavy silence. He didn't see what she could do, but just the thought of the power she could wield if she got the chance and wanted to sent the cold chills up and down his back.

He radioed Viji and told him to bring STARLADY as soon as he could, which Viji said would be as soon as he could get a tender-crane and clearance on the field for take-off—in other words, not very soon. Then he took DeWalt into the captain's cabin and sat

him down over a bottle and began carefully to explain what Laryl was and why she had to go back.

DeWalt's face became a thing of wonder. The space-burn faded to a greenish gray and the freckles that had been hidden by it stood out like the spots on a star-map.

"You mean I've been travelling around with—" he said, and could not go any farther. He picked up the bottle and drank hastily. Then he put it down and said, "Take her back, friend. She's all yours."

He got up and began to pace up and down the cabin, shaking his head. "My gosh. If I'd known that I wouldn't have touched her. No wonder they've flipped all over the Pleiades. Do you suppose this Arrikon knows what she's got?"

"For sure. They wouldn't tell him at The College when they hired him, but he knows. And he wouldn't take her back to Esha, not if they gave him the whole planet. He's not the type that gets scared at the idea of power."

DeWalt moved his shoulders uneasily. "It's just not my game. I don't mind turning a dirty dollar now and then, but this is just too big. And she's such a dope, too. Honest, Sam, it's hard to believe she could really do anything like that. Are you sure the priests aren't maybe stretching the truth a little?"

VAGABOND quivered suddenly,

shifting a bit as though her center of balance had been somehow disturbed. Barron and DeWalt froze, startled. And then from the well of the ship there came to them Ybra's voice raised in a wild cry of alarm.

CHAPTER VII

BARRON RUSHED into the well. Ybra was standing on the opposite side of the narrow catwalk that circled it, staring up. He babbled something to Barron and pointed.

Barron looked up. The well ran from stern to nose of the ship, giving access to all sections in any position. In this position the stern fins were on the ground and the nose was pointed vertically skyward. And a strange vertigo came over Barron, a queasy twisting of the innards that made him grab at the railing for support.

He was looking at the sky. The well went up so far in a normal manner and then it simply stopped and everything around it stopped—storerooms, bulkheads, holds, hull. There was nothing. Just sky.

DeWalt, beside him, made a sound of anguish and dismay. And another section of the ship began, even as they watched it, to crumble and fall away.

It fell in clouds of fine dust that blew away on the night wind

or sifted down through the well to land gently on their upturned faces. It was all done quietly. Everything disintegrated at once, block by block, so that there was nothing to crash or shatter. On the catwalk above them one of DeWalt's crewmen came out to see what the trouble was. He took one look and then flung himself down the ladder. He did not stop or speak. Distantly, Barron noticed the man's face as he went by. It was stony white, the eyes and the mouth stretched wide.

"What is it?" whispered DeWalt. "What's happening?"

The dust came down, iron and steel and alloy, plastic and cloth, supplies of all kinds, the flesh and bones of a ship. Matter, dissolved and pulled apart.

Matter.

And if you can make it, you can unmake it.

But of course.

"Give me the key," said Barron. "The key to her cabin."

He had to grab DeWalt and shake him, before DeWalt gave him the key. Barron ran fast around the catwalk. Lucich had come from somewhere below. He saw him and heard him speak but Lucich was not important and he paid no attention. He unlocked the cabin door very carefully, very silently. Big drops of cold sweat ran down his face. He opened the

door a crack and looked in.

Laryl was sitting cross-legged on the floor. Her face was puckered in an expression of intense preoccupation, her eyes almost shut, the tip of her pink tongue sticking out between her teeth. In her hands she held the insulated parts of two loops of wire. Between the loops was a curious crude helix, also made of wire—she must have stripped part of the cabin's light-circuit, and they had taught her enough at The College so that she could do that without electrocuting herself. She was holding the helix in a certain way and it was glowing hotly, apparently drawing power from the ship's huge batteries to augment whatever weird power of the mind Laryl had. During the second or two that Barron watched her she rotated slightly on her bottom, shifting the focus of the helix, and he knew that when she had completed a full circle another section of the ship would be gone.

Barron set his jaw hard and made a great clumsy leap ending in a kick that sent the helix flying out of her hands to lie sputtering in a corner.

It only sputtered for a second. Then it began rapidly to cool off, and Barron realized that it had not in the least been getting power from the ship's batteries nor from anywhere else but out of Laryl's

dishevelled head. It was not connected to anything. It was merely a focusing device. Probably anything would do as well, if Laryl only knew it. Probably that was a safety-check on the infinite psycho-kinetic potentialities of the Keepers, the conditioned belief that their power would only function through a helical coil. For the first time he could remember, Barron felt a strong inclination to faint from sheer unmanly fright.

Instead, translating fright into anger, he grasped Laryl and set her roughly on her feet and shook her.

"What do you think you're doing?" he shouted at her.

She laughed, sticking out her lip defiantly. "I'm ruining the ship, that's what I'm doing. Now how are you going to take me back to Esha?"

"Oh Lord," said Barron. "Why couldn't you have had brains, too?" DeWalt and Lucich were peering in through the door. He nodded to the wire helix. "Pick that thing up and get it out of here. Go ahead, it's harmless without her, and vice versa."

It was Lucich who went over and got it. DeWalt was in a daze. "She wrecked my ship," he kept saying. "My ship!" And then he said, "I'll kill her."

It took Lucich and Ybra both to hold him back.

"All right," said Barron savagely to Laryl, "Now you've advertised your power to the world, suppose we just let Arrikon have you."

"I'll do the same for him," said Laryl. "I told you, I won't let anybody take me back."

BARRON SHOOK HIS HEAD. "He won't take you back, not now. Not after you've demonstrated what you can do. Listen." Already sounds were filtering in from outside, the sounds of a crowd gathering. "No," said Barron, "you can go and be free as a bird with Arrikon. Or as free as he'll let you be, while he uses your power to set himself up as the biggest man in the galaxy."

Barron thought he knew men well enough to be pretty sure that was about what the Altairan would try to do. He was trying to produce an effect in Laryl, and he got it. Her face now lost its stubborn rigidity and became doubtful.

"Would he do that? Would he really dare—"

"He's an adventurer, a killer for profit. I doubt if his great moral sense would stop him."

"But that isn't right," Laryl said, looking as outraged as by a blasphemy. "That's the first thing they taught us at The College, that the power must never be used for gain or—"

She stopped rather suddenly.

Barron said, "Or what?"

"Or for our own advantage," she said in a small voice. "Like I just did." She sat down on the bunk and put her head in her hands. "It isn't fair. I didn't want this power. I just — had it. But if they hadn't come and tested me and trained me up I wouldn't have known I had it or been able to use it, and why couldn't they just have let me alone?"

Yes, thought Barron, why indeed? The noises of the crowd were growing louder by the second, and now from the distance another one was added, a shrill insistent hooting that had an official sound to it. Barron hauled Laryl to her feet and hustled her out of the cabin, shoving DeWalt ahead of him.

"We better get out of here to the landing-field, fast," he said. "And hope Viji gets STARLADY here before it's too late."

They began to climb down the ladder. Barron looked up once at the open sky above where the encircling body of the ship ended so abruptly. He did not look at it again.

They came to the lock hatch. And it was already too late.

Motioning Ybra and Lucich to keep the girl back out of sight, Barron stepped out of the lock with DeWalt. The dock area blazed with light as it always did at night.

Normally surface traffic was limited to fueling and maintenance crews and the various machines they operated. But now around DeWalt's ruined ship people had gathered and were still gathering, from other ships, from everywhere, as word spread of the incredible thing that had happened to VAGABOND.

The crowd alone would not, perhaps, have stopped them. But the shrill hooting noise was close, too close to be avoided. Three fast ground cars bearing the flags and insignia of Port Authority came sweeping up and then pushed a way through the crowd. A batch of Port police got out, and four Phalian officials of various sorts, and Arrikon.

The police began instantly to disperse the too-curious crowd. Arrikon pointed to Barron and DeWalt.

"Those are the two ring-leaders." He named them. "They took the girl away from me by force, and I demand her return."

All the time he was talking his eyes were on the ship, looking, thinking, gleaming with a hot spark of greedy inspiration. And Barron knew that he had not guessed wrong about Arrikon.

The officials came forward, flanked by the police.

"Are you Harley DeWalt and Samuel Barron?"

They admitted they were.

"A very serious charge has been laid against you," one of the officials said. He was a typical Pahlian, his palms worn as slippery-smooth as his conscience by the graft that had passed over them. Just now it was obvious that he and Arrikon had a working arrangement. He, too, looked up at the weirdly truncated ship, and his eyes, like Arrikon's glittered and gleamed.

"We understand you have aboard a citizen of Esha-Sirritt in the Pleiades, a woman named Laryl. We understand you're holding her by force. We also understand—" and here he nodded at the ruined ship—"that you constitute a threat to the safety and security of Pahlia, and that seems obvious. Therefore you will all be placed in custody pending further investigation."

Barron said, "We have a woman aboard all right, but I don't think it could be the same one this man is talking about." Barron smiled blandly at Arrikon. "He's made some mistake. I've certainly never seen him before. Wait, I'll bring the woman out and show you."

He turned swiftly and with DeWalt leaped inside the port before anybody thought to stop him. Lucich and Ybra were standing at the back of the lock chamber with Laryl, looking grim. Barron took the girl's hands.

"You heard all that?"

She nodded. "They're going to put us all in jail."

"Us," said Barron. "But not you. Arrikon has made some kind of a deal with the Pahlans. They're working together, and all their tongues are fairly hanging out. I don't think you're going to jail, and I don't think you're going to Esha. You'll go with Arrikon, and they'll use your power to the limit."

Tears came into Laryl's eyes again and she began to wail. "I don't want to go with him. I can't use the power that way. I'm afraid—"

"Oh, stop that and listen to me," Barron said impatiently, but the sniffling sobs continued.

"My ship," said DeWalt wrathfully. "And probably my neck in jail, too. I'll give her something to bawl about—"

A ROARING NOISE went over-head and Lucich darted to the well to look up. He came hopping back. "That's STARLADY coming in — Viji's landing over on the west side of the field." And he added dismally, "A fat chance we have of ever getting to her now."

"Quit croaking and get that hellex, fast," said Barron. "Yes, the one Laryl was using. Jump."

"Oh, now, listen," said DeWalt, "you're not going crazy, are you? This dame is dynamite when she

has that gadget. Look what she did to my —"

"Have you got any better ideas?" demanded Barron. He turned to Laryl. He said, "There's only one way we can hold back that bunch out there, long enough for us to get to STARLADY."

Laryl shook her head. "No, I couldn't do what you're thinking. I just couldn't. The power must never be used for gain or —"

"I know, for your own advantage," Barron interrupted. "But you've got to, this time."

Her trembling lower lip came out in a faintly mulish expression. "I couldn't. It's forbidden."

DeWalt swore lividly, but Barron paid him no attention. "Listen, it's to keep the power itself from being used by Arrikon and those others. Aren't you supposed to guard the power, to protect it?"

She looked at him, troubled and confused by that. Of a sudden, Barron felt an unexpected warmth for her. She might not be too terribly bright, but she had got into all this by a very human desire to be something other than a Keeper, and she was very worried and lovely.

A peremptory voice called from outside. "Bring the girl out and give yourselves up!"

It decided Laryl. She looked at Barron and said in a whisper, "Am I to destroy them all — everything

out there?"

"Good God, no!" he said. "But do anything that will drive them back, keep them from following us until we get away in STAR-LADY."

Lucich hurried in with the helix, holding it as though it were a reptile of a very venomous sort. Barron took it and handed it to Laryl.

She sat down on the floor of the lock, facing the outside, and again took the two wires in her hands. She shut her eyes and frowned. After a second she opened them again and shook her head.

"I'm so nervous," she said, "I can't think."

DeWalt swore. Barron crouched down beside her. He put his hand on her shoulder and said soothingly,

"Yes, you can. You can think, Laryl. Something to stop them. Something to hold them back."

Her eyes went shut again. "Something to hold. Something —"

She fell silent and the tip of her tongue crept out between her teeth.

From outside came a sharp questioning cry.

Laryl smiled. "Lovely," she whispered to herself. "Soft and pretty. Big. Big."

From outside, all at once, loud and spreading, the voice of panic.

Barron peered through the lock door. At first he wasn't sure what he was looking at. Around the far

edges where the crowd had been pushed there was great activity, an outward surge of people scampering quickly away. Closer to VAGABOND, where the police and the officials and Arrikon were, there was an area of shimmering uncertainty. It was something like a silvery gray fog, and something like pellucid water, and it enveloped Arrikon, the police and the officials. Their figures moved in it darkly, wildly, but the fog or water or whatever it was had substance too. Perhaps if you were inside it, it would seem more like a sliding gelatinous semi-solid. Its rising tide trapped their feet and hampered the movement of their legs, and it began to move slowly as though some wind was pushing it, back away from VAGABOND and toward the crowd, growing and billowing as it went, its spreading edges glittering prettily in the floodlights.

Barron could hear the men caught by that glittering, rising tide yelling loudly. The stuff was spreading fast now, faster than the crowd could run, rolling in shining waves toward other ships. Laryl was becoming intoxicated with her own power. Barron, a cold feeling at his spine, went back to her and shook her gently. "That's enough," he said. "That's fine."

She sighed and let the helix droop. "It felt so nice," she said.

"I was enjoying that."

"Yes," said Barron. "But we have to go now. One of their cars is in the clear now — we can use that."

They went hurriedly out of the lock. The pearly tide had stopped rising and spreading. It looked very queer, gleaming in its arrested waves in the middle of the steel-and-concrete docks, with panicky people still fighting their way back out of it. Laryl was fascinated. Barron had almost to lift her into the car.

"That's the first time I've really created anything all on my own," she said. "Without any supervision, I mean. Usually it's a community effort — we Keepers all build together and then tear it all down."

"It's wonderful," Barron said tightly, and sent the car barrelling away fast along the row of docks toward the landing-field.

STARLADY had touched down on the west side. Nobody tried to stop them and there was no pursuit at all yet from the panicky mess behind them. The car screeched to the side of STARLADY as the lock opened.

Barron almost knocked Viji down getting in. "I'll explain later," he told him. "Right now we've got to move. See that everybody's snugged down. Take-off right now."

He rushed into the bridge with Lucich, hit the warning siren once

and then slammed down the main jet control. He heaved a sigh of relief as the rockets fired and the tremendous surge of power pressed him down into the recoil-chair and pressed and pressed until he was blind and breathless with it. STARLADY was up and away.

Space took her in. Wide dark cleanly space, with Pahlia's star a golden sunburst at her back and the Pleiades wrapped in burning mist ahead of her, indescribably beautiful and strange. Barron looked at them and loved them, every one of the Seven Sisters and their two thousand friends.

"They'll be after us," Lucich said gloomily. "That Arrikon ain't the kind to let a good thing go, and he's got the Pahlians to help, and that's bad. They're worse than wolves on the track of money."

"I know," Barron said. "But with any luck, any luck at all, we ought to be able to reach Esha before they catch up with us."

A voice behind him spoke, clearly and with a note of absolute resolve.

"We're not going to Esha."

He turned around.

"I've made up my mind," Laryl said. "I've done so wrong already that I might as well go the whole way. And I know now what I can do. I can do anything. Anything I want."

Her eyes shone with a bright blue

light. She stood in the entrance to the bridge, her hair falling over her white shoulders and her filmy gown most enticingly torn by the violent activities of the past hours. Clutched against her magnificent bosom she held, with fierce pride and awareness of power, the lopsided helix.

She looked at Barron, and she smiled.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT LARYL HAD DECIDED on, Laryl got. She held the helix in her pretty hands and said, "We'll go to Vega." And they went that way.

Barron tried to reason with her. "STARLADY is a freighter. She's slow, and Vega is a very long way off. Arrikon and the Pahlians will have fast ships. We won't have a chance to outrun them."

"I stopped them before," she said. "I can stop them again."

Barron said, "It'll take more than a wave of — whatever that stuff was, to stop spaceships. And this time they'll be on guard against that."

"I can stop them."

And that was that.

Red DeWalt tried force. The helix had been taken away from her once before by that method. But she had learned, too. He crept up behind her but she was watch-

ing, and before he could knock it out of her hands he was trapped as effectively as Arrikon had been, by the same strange and instantly-created semi-solidity. He did not try it again. Neither did anyone else.

STARLADY lumbered at her best matronly speed toward Vega. Barron kept a constant watch on radar and quarreled bitterly with DeWalt. "The next time," he said, "that a cute chick comes up to you and asks to be taken away from where she is, do me a favor? Tell her to go jump down the nearest well."

"Do me a favor," said DeWalt. "Will you? Just a little one. Shut up!"

Laryl lounged in the best cabin, which had once been Barron's hugging the helix and enjoying herself.

She had abandoned herself wholly to sin and the delights of power. "I'll never use it to hurt anyone," she said, "nor to make money, but after all the power is mine, isn't it? And why shouldn't I get something out of it for myself?"

And she dreamed dreams. Vega was the hub and center of the galaxy, rich, dazzling, full of excitement. Laryl saw herself, arrayed in a succession of magnificent costumes, dancing all night on crystal floors, being entertained by

hosts of handsome men, moving like a bright star through a glitter of rather vague but delightful things. "I'll do all the things I used to imagine when I was back in our village on Esha," she said. "I'll see all the places and meet all the people. I'll really *live*, for the first time in my whole life. It'll be lots better than Pahlia."

She babbled happily on and on, and Barron, who was sure she could be the belle of the ball anywhere even without her helix, couldn't find it in his heart to blame her. The College had made a damned poor choice when they picked her for a life of dedicated seclusion. But if he could have got her pretty white neck between his hands, he would have wrung it all the same. Laryl might dance on tables all over Vega's eight worlds, but he didn't see what he would be doing, nor any of the other Earthmen of the Pleiades, with the ports shut in their faces and no place to go.

He tried appealing to her on that score, but she only said reasonably enough that after all they were big strong men and would have to look out for themselves.

"And after all," she said, "they didn't ask me if I wanted to be a Keeper."

Space stretched on ahead, and on all sides, and behind, sparsely

populated in this sector with suns. Barron watched the ultrascopes, and inevitably he was rewarded by the sight of three unmistakable blips, moving together and at a steady rate of speed far exceeding that of STARLADY on precisely the same course.

He showed them to the others and DeWalt said, "We can't outrun 'em, that's for sure. So?"

"So there's a cluster of wild stars about here," Barron said, working with the stereo chart and showing a related group of five suns almost at right angles to their present course. "Chart shows considerable nebulosity and dust concentration. If we run in there we might foul up their radar enough to dodge them."

Lucich said sourly that they might as well get shot running as sitting.

They changed course, sharply.

THE JARRING of the lateral-thrust vortices—they were in overdrive—brought Laryl steaming out of her cabin.

"Why are we turning?" she demanded.

Barron explained. She wanted to be shown the blips on the ultroscope screen which were now in the act of shifting course to match STARLADY's move, and were quite obviously overhauling her. Laryl made a gesture of superb

contempt.

"Go on to Vega," she said. "I'll take care of them."

She faced STARLADY's stern and lifted the helix.

Barron said uneasily, "You're not in normal space now, you know. There isn't the same balance here between free particles and free energy and solid matter. Even the scientists don't understand what goes on in these ultra-speed warps. So take it easy—"

"Just go on to Vega," she said, and shut her eyes.

Barron began to sweat.

The three blips on the screen sped forward undisturbed.

Viji came running frantic from the drive-chamber aft. "She's heating. The whole assembly, the main coil housing, even the walls. She'll blow—"

He saw Laryl and what she was doing. His wizened face became even more ashen than before.

"It's her," he said. "What she's doing. This isn't normal space. The warp is damping all that energy output, and it's dissipating as heat. If you don't stop her, we'll burn up!"

Even the air in the bridge was hot now. Barron shouted, "*Laryl!*" But she was deep, deep in her supreme effort at concentration. The helix glowed red hot, turning white at the tip.

Barron whispered, "For God's

sake!"

He launched himself at her in a flying tackle, from the side.

He was not at all clear about what happened after that. He thought at first that STARLADY had blown up in his face. But after a while he realized that that couldn't be so because if you blew up in hyperspace there were not even whole atoms of you left, let alone whole pieces. He lifted his head slowly and looked around.

Ybra, Lucich, DeWalt and Viji were all huddled back against the farthest wall of the bridge. They were staring with four pairs of popping eyes out of four terrified faces. It was noticeably cooler. The helix, somewhat battered, lay under the ultroscope. Laryl was lying on her side, rubbing her uppermost hip and crying like a startled child.

"There, there," he said, and took her in his arms. "I didn't mean to hurt you, honey. Didn't you see what was happening? I told you this was a different kind of space. You weren't getting through. The ship was starting to burn up—"

Viji scuttled out and went back to his drive. The proximity-warning system set a whole battery of red lights flashing all over the bridge. Even in the warp it was possible to detect the slight fraction of additional warp added by the presence of massive bodies with mas-

sive magnetic fields. In other words, stars. They were close to the group, and it was time to cut, the overdrive.

"Take her through, Red," he said to DeWalt, and DeWalt sat down in the pilot's seat.

"You hurt me," Laryl said.

She said it so much in the fashion of a child that he cradled her head on his shoulder and held it there. It felt nice. He put his other arm around her waist. That felt nice, too. "I'm sorry," he said into her tumbled hair. "But I couldn't let you go up in smoke, could I?"

"I don't believe you," she said with a sudden unreasoning fierceness that also was childlike. "You're just determined to take me back to Esha and you don't care how you do it."

She pounded on his face and chest with her hands, her cheeks red with rage.

For the life of him, Barron couldn't resist kissing her hard on the lips.

They tasted salty. Someone really ought to break her of that crying habit. She continued to fight him, and then of a sudden it happened.

DeWalt took the ship out of overdrive and into normal space.

The shock was always vertiginous and unpleasant. Barron lost track of what he was doing for a second or two, and that gave Laryl a

chance for a convulsive movement. He grabbed wildly for her but by the time he caught her again she had got her hand on the helix.

"If you won't take me to Vega we won't go anywhere," she cried, and there was a wild lurching as something happened to STARLADY. Barron hit Laryl hard on the side of the head. STARLADY began to spiral, rolling over and over like an ungainly porpoise. There was a tremendous amount of noise. Barron clawed his way in a cold panic across the bridge to the pilot's chair. Red DeWalt was not in it now. Lucich was frozen to the co-pilot's seat, not doing anything, just hanging on. There was a planet where no planet should have been, ahead or right under them, whichever you wanted to call it. It belonged to a sun that burned like a big ugly furnace in a sooty cloud of dust. Barron grabbed for the controls.

The main tubes were dead. He thought probably Laryl had unmade them like she had unmade the forward part of VAGABOND. He considered the possibility, for a fractional second, of trying to force her to re-make them, and decided against it. You could tear a thing down perfectly well without understanding it, but to build any part of an operating spaceship you had to understand it, and he did not want to depend on any main blast

tubes that Laryl put together out of her own head. Anyway, she was still dazed from the clout he had given her.

THERE WERE CRIES of pain, dismay and protest from various parts of the ship. He ignored them. The planet was falling up at him at a frightening rate of speed. He saw it as a dirty-green ball, like verdigrised copper, fairly springing at him out of the dark-glowing stellar dust. He hit the lateral jets, talking to STARLADY with incoherent curses and pleas to stop her damned corkscrewing. She obeyed him finally, with a heavy rattling of her plates, and went wallowing down into the copper-colored sky on an even keel.

She was still going too fast. He did everything he could to slow her down. He did things he didn't know you could do with a ship, using nose and steering jets for purposes that had never been intended in their engineering. And he did slow her down, enough so that when she came booming down out of a thick overcast and through a driving rain to hit the close-packed mat of a forest, she crumpled the trees under her quite gently and came to rest at the end of a long torn swath, lying prone with every joint in her ancient frame sprung wide and her belly ripped open and spilling cargo into the

mud. But she was still a ship, and not a smoking pile of junk.

After a while the people in her began to stir, all except one of the mechanics, who was hurt, and Laryl, who had been knocked totally unconscious. DeWalt was swearing viciously over a broken wrist. Ybra looked at Barron and grinned and said, "You were right. I should have stayed home." Blood was running from his nose as water runs from a tap, and there was a blackening welt running right across his face under the eyes. He was only grinning to keep himself from crying.

Barron pried himself out of the chair. He felt as though his every joint was sprung like STARLADY's, and every bone shattered, but since he was able to get up and move that was obviously impossible. He helped Lucich up. Lucich was groggy, but he did not seem injured. The hurt mechanic had a dislocated shoulder, but the other mechanic and the electronics man and Viji were all right.

Viji glared at the crumpled form of the unconscious girl and said, "You know what happened, Sam. All of a sudden no tubes, no jets. Like that, gone. She killed a good ship."

"Two good ships," said DeWalt. "And damn near got us, too. We ought to—"

"Yes," Barron said, "we ought

to, but we won't. And besides we may need her and her gifted so-called mind. Where's that helix?"

DeWalt cried out to heaven. "Look what happened the last time you gave it to her! Why don't you just shoot us all now and be done with it?"

Barron heaved the girl's inert body into his arms and said, "If we can fight off Arrikon and the Pahlians without her I won't dream of it. But find that helix. You," he said to the uninjured mechanic, "break out the first-aid box and some rations and fill all the thermo-bottles with water. Help him, Ybra. Hop to it. Viji, break out the ship's armament."

Imposing words, which when translated meant three EP handguns and two rifles, with not unlimited ammunition.

He carried Laryl out of the bridge and along the buckled central well. The lock was burst open. A rank smell of wetness and greenness and mud came in, with the sound of rain. There had not been any time to test the atmosphere, nor any use of testing it, since whatever it was they were stuck with it. So far it did not seem poisonous in any way, and the forest was a good indication. He eased Laryl down into the mud, jumped down himself, and helped DeWalt down after him.

There was a roaring, ripping

thunder across the sky. Barron looked up. The clouds were riven apart, once, twice, three times in close succession, showing the metallic bellies of three ships.

Arrikon and the Pahlians, looking for a place to land.

CHAPTER IX

IT WAS, BARRON THOUGHT, one hell of a world.

The rain had stopped. The sun shone through broken clouds, a huge sulfurous fiery thing that was only prevented from setting the whole planet ablaze by the heavy concentration of dust that occluded it, tempering its heat. The wet ground steamed. The forest, or jungle, steamed too. It was one of those vile-looking places, bloated and gorged with heat, water, and good rotting humus so that even the trees were fat.

Barron led the way through it, his lungs laboring against the semi-liquid air. The others straggled and struggled behind. The men had had to take turns carrying Laryl, all except DeWalt and the mechanic with the hurt shoulder. It was Viji's turn now, and Barron kept looking around to make sure he had not quietly dropped her into a convenient pool. She was still out cold, and he found himself strangely distressed about it. In spite of all she had done he

could not bear the thought of her being really hurt.

Floundering through green algae up to his thighs, he wondered if he was in love with her.

Fat lot of good it would do him if he was.

"How much farther?" asked De-Walt. Viji had splinted his wrist and given him a shot but he was almost as pale as the injured mechanic.

Barron said, "Just a little way."

"Wouldn't it have been better," asked Ybra diffidently, "to scatter out and hide in the jungle? I don't see how they could ever find us in this mess."

Barron shook his head. "They'd beat the bushes till they did. They've got all the men and all the time they need. We don't have either. They'll blow what's left of STARLADY first thing, which means we'll have no supplies to fall back on. Besides, that's what they'd expect us to do. The last thing they'll be looking for is for us to attack them."

He did not state the real reason, which was that he was sick and tired of running.

The trees and the rank creepers thinned a bit over a rib of rock. A jagged tumbled cliff of black basalt lifted up in a long line capped with a spire that looked from this angle as though it had speared the lopsided sun.

"There," said Barron.

They scrambled up and in among the slabs of rock. Barron had found the cliff less than a mile from STARLADY, and when he had climbed it he had been able to see how the jungle gave way to a rising plain dotted but not drowned with trees. He had seen the three ships of the Pahlans and the man from Altair standing on the plain, and he had decided that the cliff would be as good a place to make a stand as any. Arrikon and the Pahlans would almost have to come this way—it was both the straightest and the easiest path to the wrecked STARLADY.

They disposed themselves along the face of the cliff wherever the rock offered shelter, keeping a lookout for the sort of creature that inhabits such places. They killed several of a particular nastiness, including a pair of snake-like things about ten feet long and no thicker than wire. Clouds lay in weird heavy layers above the horizon, colored strangely with tints of green and ochre and sooty gray on the lower tiers. Higher up, the sun bled red all over the sky. It was, Barron thought again, one hell of a world.

They had shared out the guns and ammunition. Barron had one of the rifles, Lucich the other. Ybra, Viji and the uninjured mechanic, whose name was Srann, had the

hand-guns. DeWalt and the hurt mechanic they put in a safe niche of the rock with Laryl, both of them too sick to object.

Laryl was still unconscious. An ugly purple goose-egg disfigured her lovely forehead. Barron felt her pulse worriedly. It seemed strong, and her breathing was regular. He put the softest pack under her head for a pillow. DeWalt watched him sardonically but did not say anything.

Lucich, who had been carrying the thing hitched to his own pack, handed the helix to DeWalt.

Barron took up a post near the niche. He could see Ybra's white crest, muddy and draggled now, a little below him and to his right. If he lifted his gaze he could see the ships out on the plain. It was dreadfully hot. Sweat gathered and dripped off the end of his nose.

HE SAW MEN MOVING in the sparse jungle along the line of the cliff, coming closer.

"Shoot for the leaders," Barron said quietly. "And don't waste your shots."

He wiped his sodden sleeve across his face and laid his rifle along the basalt slab.

He looked for Arrikon.

He saw him, distinguished by his height and leanness from the shorter Pahlians. He waited with stony patience for him to come

within range, and even while he did so he realized the futility of it. Arrikon might die. The Pahlians might die. But if Laryl survived, other Arrikons and other Pahlians would spring up, as ruthless and greedy as they, lusting not after her beauty but after the incredible power of her mind that could make any man who controlled it an emperor above emperors, a demi-god to stride the galaxy. Now that her secret was out, she would never be safe again, unless he could get her back to the cloisters of The College on Esha, where she would have a whole world and others of her kind to protect her.

He aimed for the center of Arrikon's chest. With explosive pellets there was no need for precision. And as he did so he saw Arrikon look up suddenly at the cliff—perhaps some slight sound or movement had betrayed the ambush, or perhaps it was only that Arrikon had realized the possibilities offered by that somber pile of rock. Whichever it was, he made a long leap that took him behind a tree and sent Barron's missile whizzing past him to burst harmlessly against another trunk.

The ambush was not a total loss. They shot two of the Pahlian leaders and three of the thirty or so men who were with them, before they could find an adequate cover.

The return barrage popped and

banged, but all Barron's men had to do was stay out of sight in their holes.

So far, so good.

Silence.

The metallic voice of a portable loudspeaker boomed out from among the trees.

"You're hopelessly outnumbered," it said, in what was unmistakably Arrikon's voice. "And we can hold you there until you starve or die of thirst."

Barron shouted back, his voice echoing dully from the cliff. "Sure," he said. "But it'll take a long time. How many of you will be left by then?"

He snapped a shot toward the sound of the loudspeaker, stirring up some hasty movement in the brush.

"Listen," said Arrikon. "We don't want you or your friends. We only want the girl. Send her down and we'll let you go. We'll even give you a lifeboat."

"No," said Barron. "I'm taking her back to Esha."

Arrikon laughed. "Let's not be silly, Barron. Nobody's taking her back to Esha. I'll make a deal." He corrected himself. "We'll make a deal, my partners and I."

"I'm listening."

"We split four ways. You, me, and my two partners. Make your own arrangements with your friends. What that girl has ought

to be more than enough for all of us. Well?"

Barron was suddenly delivered of a lunatic inspiration.

"That's fine," he shouted. "I'd love to. But there's one little hitch." He took a deep breath and yelled it out. "The girl's dead. It's only her body I'm taking to Esha."

He turned and ducked into the niche. DeWalt was staring at him as though he had gone crazy. Barron muttered, "She looks limp enough to be dead, and Lord knows she's heavy enough. Maybe it'll fool them."

He picked Laryl up, letting her arms and her head with its banner of red hair hang down. He carried her out where everyone could see.

"She was hurt in the crash, and died," he shouted. "So now we have nothing to fight about, have we?"

Silence.

Laryl hung heavy in his arms and the wind blew her hair and fluttered^d her garment.

"Leave us that lifeboat," Barron shouted, "and we'll take her body back to Esha."

Silence again.

Ybra looked up, wide-eyed and hopeful. Barron held his breath.

It might, just possibly, have worked. But Barron never knew, because that was when the first glimmer of consciousness returned

to Laryl. She waved her arms and moaned, twisting around in Barron's grasp, and that was the end of that.

HE FELL BACK with her into the niche. A howl of anger went up from the men below, and almost immediately they rushed the cliff. Missiles began to burst like exploding hail.

Laryl held her head between her hands and whispered, "What's happened?"

"You've got us all killed with your damned stubbornness, that's what," said Barron furiously. "You wrecked the ship and now they're going to finish us off and take you, and I hope you're happy." He was so glad she was all right that he could have strangled her. He picked up his rifle and went out on the cliff again.

There were men below clambering among the rocks. There were other men among the trees firing a steady barrage of missiles to keep the defenders down while the climbers got within striking distance. Barron was too angry and hopeless now to worry. He fired down the cliff, exposing himself with moderate recklessness in the hope of getting one more shot at Arrikon. But he didn't see him, and one by one the guns on the cliff stopped firing as his men ran out of ammunition.

And then, suddenly, it began to rain rocks out of the sky.

The rocks fell straight downward out of the nothingness above, crashing and banging among the trees, tearing off branches, and everything else came to a stupefied standstill for a moment. Then there was a rising chorus of shouts, and men began to run out from among the trees and scatter wildly. And the rocks came down, crash, crash, crash.

Somebody screamed, "Look at the ships!"

It was raining rocks there, too. Big ones, house-sized rocks, battering the metal hulls.

Barron turned and peered into the niche. Laryl held the helix, and her face had a brooding look.

"By God!" cried DeWalt, his face aflame. "She's doing it—she's done it—"

Down at the foot of the cliff Arrikon gathered a small party of men and came swarming up. The man from Altair had not panicked. The sky could fall but he was not to be swerved. He dodged the falling stones and kept climbing even when the men around him were swept away.

He glimpsed Barron and shot fast, and the exploding missile seared the rock beside Barron, scorching his face. Half-blinded, he shot back by instinct. When he could see, Arrikon lay still.

That seemed to do it. The last men below took flight, carrying their wounded and running like rabbits toward the doubtful protection of their battered ships. Barron went into the niche.

"That's enough," he said to Laryl. "Stop it."

She appeared not to hear him.

He raised his voice one notch, not very loud, and said, "Laryl."

Her eyes opened and she glanced at him.

"I said, that's enough."

Her chin quivered. "All right, Sam," she said, and dropped the helix. "I—I didn't really mean what I said on the ship. And I'm sorry I wrecked it—I don't really hate you. And my head hurts, and I'm miserable, and—"

He took her in his arms, and she started that damned crying again.

One by one, out on the plain, the ships took off. For now, Barron knew, they were safe. With all or most of their leaders gone the men would be too disorganized to make any more attempts in the face of Laryl's power.

Barron leaned over and picked up the helix. "They never had a chance to blow the wreck," he said, "so we can hold out in her fine for a while. We'll get that radio fixed and then we'll soon be picked up."

Laryl's eyes were pleading. "And

then—"

He could not meet her eyes. "Laryl, you wouldn't be safe anywhere in the galaxy now, except on Esha. I hate it too. But—you must go back."

CHAPTER X

MANY DAYS LATER, Barron paced up and down the green terrace outside The College on Esha. He kept looking at the blank white front of the building, and when he couldn't see anything he paced the harder, uneasy and increasingly upset.

They had told him firmly to wait.

It had been a tough time for Barron emotionally since the day of that last fight on the cliff. Viji and the mechanic had managed to patch up STARLADY's radio, and then they had not had to wait too long for rescue. The rescue ship had passed them on to one of the Pleiad traders, Old Man Kirk, and Kirk had brought them to Esha—after lengthy talks by radio with the heads of The College, who had promised on solemn oaths that no harm of any sort would come to Laryl if he brought her in.

The Pleiades were open again. The traders could trade, and everything was going to be just as it had been before. Even the loss of VAGABOND and STARLADY

and their cargoes were to be indemnified by The College, in view of the services of DeWalt and Barron in bringing Laryl back. They were satisfied now that DeWalt had been a more or less innocent victim of Laryl's wiles, with no intent to use her power.

So he had given Laryl back to the safety of The College, and they had told him to wait. And everything was going to be just as it had been before, except that now he was in love with Laryl, and so nothing would ever be the same again. And he didn't know what he was waiting for.

What were they doing to her in there?

He paced and sweated and fretted and finally he could not stand it any longer. He went and beat with the heavy knocker on the great bronze door.

It opened and two priests came running through it, making motions for him to stop.

"It is almost finished," one of them said. "Hush, or you'll disturb them."

"What's almost finished?" Barron demanded. He reached out savagely. "What are they doing to her? You promised—"

"Please," said the priest. "She's perfectly safe. But it is now obvious that we made a serious mis-

take when we chose her as a Keeper, in spite of her remarkable power. In every other part of her she is totally unsuited to the office. So we are going to release her. But first she must be made safe. Her power of psychocreation must be taken from her."

"Taken from her?" asked Barron, more than ever alarmed. "How could you do that, when it's in her mind—"

The priest smiled thinly. "The power of the other six Keepers can do even that. It is a necessary safeguard. They are rearranging the synaptic pattern of her brain, so that when she wakes again she will no longer have the power she had, nor the memory of how it felt to use it, nor the wish to have it ever again. So she will not be a menace either to herself or others. Now will you be patient?"

Barron waited, not patiently but with a great hope dawning in him, with a whole new future suddenly presented to him.

And after a while she came, running down the broad green terrace from The College, into his arms.

Barron said, "*Must* you always cry?" And then he said, "Go ahead and cry, Laryl. I can always get used to that."

THE END



Atomic Miracles



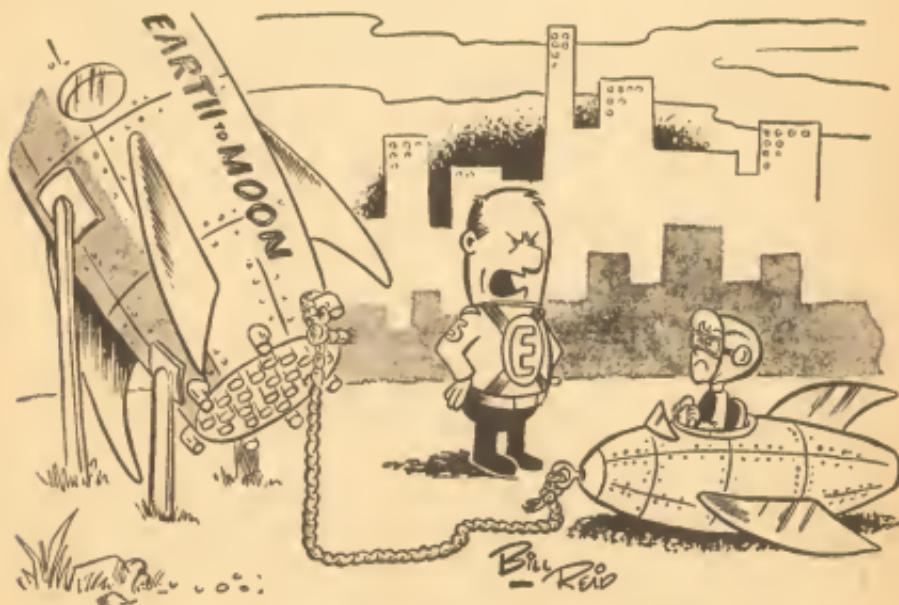
PROGRESS is proceeding so rapidly in the field of applied atomic physics—especially atomic power—that what is written one day is almost obsolete the next! A few years ago there was speculation about when atomic power would appear. Now the question is—how fast can we throw the plants together?

This change in attitude is simply the result of a tremendous technological drive to produce electrical energy for a world which can't get enough of it from falling water or burning coal and oil. Countries for

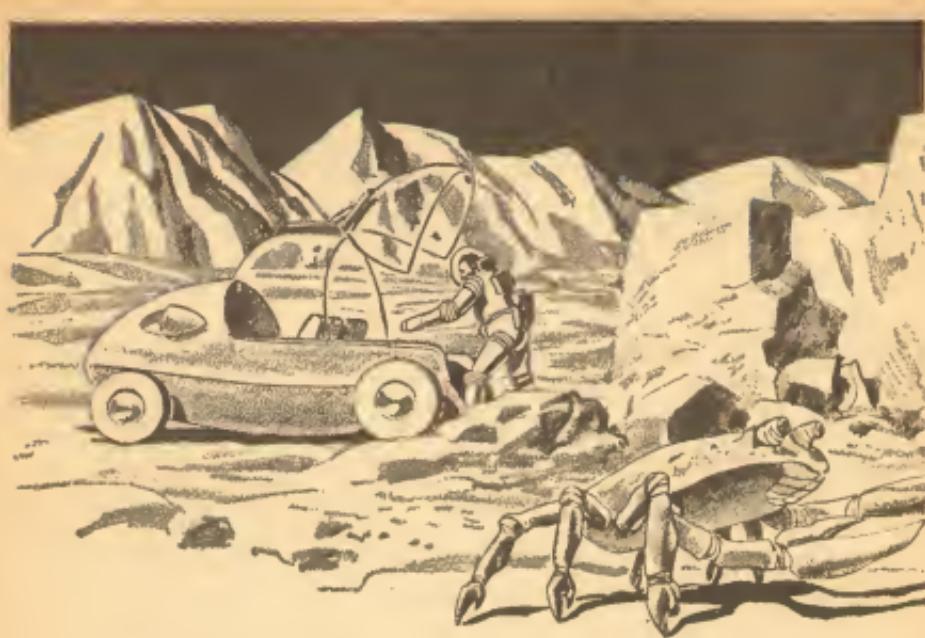
whom industrialization was never considered because of lack of electric power, now are clamoring for the atomic power plant which will change them overnight. One French visionary sees the Sahara a blooming fertile land three decades hence!

This optimism is not misplaced. Our own Navy will soon have so many shipboard atomic power plants that oil may be used only for lubrication—an incredible thing.

In cost, atomic energy competes with electricity in much of the world. This simple fact explains it ...



"For the last time, Stewart, you're not going with us."



THE DEAD WORLD

by

Warren Kastel

Certainly there should be nothing to fear on a planet where skeletal remains were the only trace of life . . . yet a beast roamed the ruins! . . .

IT WAS IN THE SYSTEM of Albireo that we found the dead world, the planetary has - been that still held the seeds of destruction and death. Two suns lit the

sky, a blue and a gold, fifth magnitude and third. A single world orbited between them, and from a hundred thousand miles up no sign of life was visible.



"I think we ought to skip this one," I said.

"No. We'll land," said Jason Holloway. "In the past, too many planets have been overlooked. *We'll land.*" There was menace in his voice.

Helplessly I glanced at my wife Lora. She said, "Jason, we've been to 20 planets. We're on our way home. What possible purpose is there in landing on a planet as dead as this one?"

"We'll land," he said. His voice was like ice.

I turned away from the telemeter panel to face him. "Dammit, Jay, it's going to take long

enough for us to get home without stopping at every ball of rock along the way. We've had enough tragedy on this expedition. Your wife —"

"I told you not to remind me of her!"

"Hell, why not? Grace Holloway was a fine woman and a credit to the Exploratory Corps. She died a martyr —"

"Shut up, Mike."

"No," I said. "Your wife was killed on our last unexplored world. We're all in bad shape mentally, tired and overstrained. Lora and I want to go home. You ought to go home too."

"As long as I'm commanding the ship," he said, "I'll do all the planning. Our tour has another three months to run and I'm not bringing the ship in early. Grace's death affected me, naturally, but not to the extent that you seem to think. I order you to put the ship into orbit and land her on this world."

"No, Mike," Lora said.

"Suppose I don't do it?" I asked.

"That's mutiny, Mike. I'd be acting within my rights to execute you and proceed with the voyage as planned. Now, will you put the ship into orbit or do I have to blast you down and do it myself?"

"Holloway, you're a madman. A raving looney madman."

"I warn you, Mike—"

"Look out!" Lora shrieked. "He's got a gun!"

I saw him going for the blaster at his hip and dove. My flying tackle caught him around the waist and sent him slamming backward; he groped for the blaster but I crashed the edge of my hand down on his wrist and the weapon dropped. He jammed his foot down on it so Lora couldn't pick it up.

I aimed a fist at him but he parried easily and sent me sprawling wildly into the hard metal shell of the ship with a stiff right. Another blow exploded under my chin. I shook my head groggily. I was

still weak from the experiences we had had on the last planet and he knew it.

He hit me a third time and I dropped, clutching at the cold metal wall. Dimly I saw him reach for the blaster.

"Okay," I wheezed. "I give up, Jay. I'll pilot the damned ship down there for you."

He chuckled coldly. "I'm sorry to hear you say that, Mike. The cybernetic monitor has it all down on tape, and now I have no excuse for executing you. You've had all the mutiny beaten out of you."

"You'd love to shoot me, wouldn't you, Holloway? Sorry I'm disappointing you." I got unsteadily to my feet and let Lora rub my bruises. Holloway was eyeing us both savagely, facing us with the blaster gripped solidly in his thick fingers. I could see the hate in his eyes, the hate and the jealousy. His wife was dead; mine was alive. And that, for Jason Holloway, was as good a reason as any to get rid of me.

Numbly I took a seat back of the control panel and began punching out an orbit on the computer.

"Make it a good one, Mike. I've still got the blaster."

"I know," I said. "Aye, aye, captain. I'm bringing the ship down for a landing, as you so politely requested."

I BROUGHT THE SHIP DOWN, thinking, *he's beat me again*. I had known Jason Holloway 10 years — ever since we met at the Space Academy — and he had always emerged on top.

In all but one respect: I had married the woman he wanted. At least, so I always thought, though Holloway served as my best man and congratulated us handsomely. But lurking in the back of his cold eyes was jealousy. I was sure of it.

He had no other reason to be jealous of me. I finished second in our graduating class; Jason Holloway was first. I was commissioned within a year after graduation, which was considered good; Holloway was in space within a month.

We both enrolled in the Exploratory Corps, where the work was the most interesting. Holloway had married by then, a fine woman named Grace Laurence. I always thought highly of Grace.

We served separately, on our first three tours in the Corps — but, inevitably, we drew a team assignment. Jason, as a Flight Commander, outranked me, and he was placed at the head of the team. I was second-in-command and our third man was Bruce Fenbert, a young Corps man on his first flight. His first, and his last.

Naturally, we were accompanied

by our wives: Holloway by Grace, myself by Lora, Fenbert by his wife Joan. Each of the women had a definite role to fill in the expedition; there's no dead weight in the Corps.

We fanned out on a wide belt through the galaxy. The job of visiting and exploring the thousands upon thousands of strange worlds dotting the universe is a tremendous one; a job that may never be finished—but we did our best. We visited the three worlds of bright Alpha Arietis, saw the globe - people of Capella IV, discovered the ancient and wise civilization on the third world of Kaus Australis.

It was on our 17th world, Alpheratz VII, that we lost the Fenberts. Holloway and his wife had remained in the ship, as prescribed by regulations, and Bruce, Joan, Lora and I were combing the misty plain of that world's one continent when abruptly the shelf of land we were on crumbled and gave way. The Fenberts, 10 feet ahead of us, dropped from sight instantly.

I peered into the abyss. It seemed bottomless. Twisting swirls of red volcanic gas curled upward.

Lora and I returned to the ship, shaken, and told Holloway what had happened. Two more martyrs were added to the rolls of the Corps.

We moved on, trying to forget the tragedy, on to the solar system

of Alphecca, in Corona Borealis. Alphecca had six worlds, three of them impossible for us to land on. We visited the other three — and on Alphecca VI Grace Holloway lost her life and the rest of us narrowly escaped.

They had come out of nowhere, five monstrous mouths with long snakelike bodies behind them. Lora, thank God, had been in the ship, but the Holloways and I were conducting routine investigations when the things appeared. Grace Holloway vanished in a single gulp. Mighty jaws clashed shut inches from my forearm. Holloway and I stood back to back, holding the beasts off with blasters and edging back to the ship while Lora watched the whole thing, helpless, hysterical.

After that I said, "Let's go home, Holloway. We've lost half our personnel. We can't take much more of this — we hardly have enough manpower to function now."

But he was adamant. "No. We investigate the Albireo system before we go home."

So we investigated Albireo. And there I was, making a forced landing on Albireo's one planet, while Jason Holloway held a gun to my back and looked for an excuse to blast me down.

That would leave just him. Him and Lora. With three months' tra-

velling between here and Earth.

Damn him, I thought, as I whipped the stick back and neatly slipped the ship into a landing orbit around the bleak world below. I knew what his filthy game was. And there wasn't a single thing I could do about it.

I LANDED THE SHIP in the heart of a broad, flat plateau.

"Okay, Holloway. We're here. What now?"

"Standard exploration pattern," he said. "At all times one of us will remain in the ship and two of us take the landcar for exploratory purposes. We'll draw straws for the first assignment."

We drew. Short straw was to remain in the ship first time around and as it worked out Holloway got the short straw. I eyed him suspiciously.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Want to draw again?"

"No. No, there isn't any need of that."

He laughed. "You afraid of something, Mike? Afraid I may fly away and leave the two of you stranded here? No, Mike — I'm not as crazy as you seem to think I am."

"I never said —"

"Quite all right. If you prefer, I'll substitute for Lora on the first shift out."

"No thanks," I said. I didn't want any favors from Holloway. "Lora and I will go."

Holloway headed around back to switch on the recording machine so we could send back our impressions of the dead world as we went. I prepared the landcar for use while Lora, the expedition's chemist, ran tests on the atmosphere outside.

"Well?" I asked when she was through.

"It's about 80 percent methane. We'll have to wear spacesuits."

"Okay."

Holloway reappeared. "The recording apparatus is functioning. And be careful out there, you two. I'd hate to come back to Earth as lone survivor of this expedition."

"Don't worry about us, Jay. We'll manage."

I broke out the rack of spacesuits and climbed into mine. Lora, trying to look brave, got into hers. I squeezed her hand briefly and clumsily with my spacesuited glove before she pressed the sealing stud.

Holloway watched us, arms folded, as we clambered into the landcar and rolled through the airlock onto the surface of the unexplored world.

AS SOON AS THE SHINY egg-shaped bullet that was the landcar was outside the ship, I nudged my chinmike to "off" and

gestured to Lora to do the same. Then, inside the pressurized cabin of the landcar, I removed the helmet of my spacesuit, and helped her off with hers.

It was necessary if we wanted to talk without Holloway overhearing us. Anything we said to each other via the chinmikes was piped back to the ship to be recorded and later transcribed for inclusion in the official report of the expeditionary team. And what I wanted to say I didn't want Holloway to hear.

"Why couldn't he let us go home?" Lora demanded. "Why did we have to stop here?"

"It wasn't for surveying purposes," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Holloway's up to something and I think I know what it is. If we went straight back to Earth he'd have no chance to dispose of me. This way, he can always manufacture an 'accident' of some sort to account for my disappearance."

Lora gave a tiny gasp. "But — why?"

I looked at her for a moment before replying. "If he gets rid of me, Lora, Jason Holloway can spend the remaining three months of the voyage alone in the ship with you. Which is something he's waited 10 years for."

"I'd never let him touch me!"

"I know, honey. But he'd have his way soon enough. Now that his wife's out of the way, poor woman, and we're on this godforsaken empty world, he's got a perfect crack at achieving his ambition."

"Mike, baby — can't we *do* something?"

"Not yet. Not now. He's officially the head of this team and if he says land, we land. And I can't kill a man because I think he's going to kill me. I need proof, some overt act of his —"

A tear trickled out of Lora's eye, I flicked it away and said, "Better get your helmet back on. He'll get suspicious if we don't report back to the ship with some descriptions soon. But remember — keep your eye on Jason. Once he gets a move ahead of us, we're finished. Or — at least — I am."

Suddenly the landcar's communicator crackled, Holloway's voice said, "What's going on, Mike? The silence at this end is deafening."

I slipped back into my helmet and turned on the radio. "We're just scouting around, Jay. Haven't found anything yet — not that I expect to."

"Let's hear some talking, anyway," he said.

I guided the landcar between the cleft of two outjutting peaks. "Nothing but rocks so far," I said. "Black basalt, mostly, with granite

outcroppings, very much weathered down. Quite a fine view from here, by the way. The yellow sun is high and the blue one off toward the horizon now — we're seeing both colors blended. Very nice effect."

"No signs of life?" Holloway asked.

"Not immediately. There's something in the distance that might have been a city, once. This place has been dead a long, long time."

"Investigate that city." It was a flat order.

THE LANDCAR SHOT forward — and I saw it was a city that lay ahead of us. Or the skeleton of a city. Bare, weathered bones of buildings jutted upward or leaned crazily, ready to fall. The meters on the landcar revealed that a bone-chilling wind was whistling through the city, a racing tide of methane gas swirling around the broken building-frames and through the hollow windows.

"This place has had it," I said. "I'd guess it's been dead for 5,000 years, at the best. We're going to get out of the landcar here and prowl around a bit."

"Make it fast," Holloway's tiny voice said in our ears. "You've only got half an hour left to your shift. We have to keep within regulations, you know."

"Yes. Within regulations," I

echoed.

I helped Lora over the top shell of the landcar and we entered the dead city. The architecture was strange, fantastic: evidently an alien civilization of a high order had lived here once.

"We're inside one of the buildings," I said, for benefit of the recording apparatus more than for Holloway. "Nothing in here except plenty of dust and some curious things that might have been furniture once."

Suddenly Lora touched my arm. I glanced in the direction she indicated.

"There's a skeleton of some sort over here," I said.

"Describe it!" Holloway was excited.

"It's pretty battered. Looks vaguely crablike, about five feet long, and it once had a hard outer shell. Hmm. There are more of them around. This place is like a graveyard; they must have died right in their homes."

"And you two wanted to go home!" Holloway crowed. "A find of great archaeological importance and we might have missed it if I'd listened to you. Say" — even with the distortion of the earphones I could detect the note of suspicion that entered his voice — "how come you didn't see this city when you made the preliminary survey

from up there in the ship?"

"I — I must have missed it," I said lamely. "From a hundred thousand miles up you can't see too much." I didn't want to tell him that I had seen the city and that I had deliberately concealed it because I knew he would have insisted on exploring it.

Not that it mattered now — because Holloway had still insisted.

"I'll note that on your record," he said. "Inefficiency. It won't look good, Mike."

I sputtered but didn't say anything. I flashed the searchbeam into a dark corner of the building and revealed a couple more of the crab - like skeletons.

"You see anything else?" Holloway asked.

"Just dead crabs all over the place. Maybe further on there's some explanation of how they all died."

"We'll get it some other time," he said. "Your time's up. Come back to the ship, now."

"We're on our way."

HOLLOWAY STUDIED the pictures I'd taken with keen interest, or a good imitation thereof. "These crablike beings were definitely intelligent, Mike. We'll have to give this world a thorough going - over. Something deadly struck them — a plague, or worse.

We have to find out what it is."

Lora glanced at him. "Jay, we've been in space two whole years now. Can't we —"

"Go back to Earth? No! Not yet! Not until this mystery has been cleared up!"

I knew he was lying for all he was worth. Holloway had a keen scientific mind but this was just another dead planet, similar to half a score others that we'd seen on this trip or earlier ones. There wasn't any real reason for us to continue exploration at all; normal procedure now would be to send word home and have them ship a team of trained archaeologists here to unravel the dead world's mysteries.

But there was no point telling that to Holloway. He knew that already.

The Exploratory Corps is just that—a corps of preliminary scouts that surveys the outer worlds and reports back to Earth, which then sends out specialists for more detailed surveys. It's not our job to spend long periods of time on one planet — not with millions of them waiting to be explored.

Holloway stared fixedly at me. "It's unfortunate that there are only three of us. That means that someone always has to take two consecutive turns outside."

"But we won't be staying here

long, anyway," I said.

"We'll stay here as long as it's necessary," he said coldly. I could read between the lines: *we'll stay here as long as you're alive and in my way, Mike.*

"Okay, then. It looks like you and I take the next shift outside."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, it's your turn to go," I said. "Plus either Lora or me. I don't want Lora to take two turns in a row, so I volunteer to go with you."

He shook his head. "Rules have to be followed. You and your wife will have to draw lots to see who goes."

I shrugged. "You're suddenly becoming quite the stickler for rules, Holloway."

"Time's wasting. Draw lots."

I turned away and Lora and I chose. She drew the short straw.

"Lora stays here. Let's go, Holloway. It's you and me and the dead crabmen out there, old pal."

A momentary flicker of emotion sprang to life in his face. I tried to read it. Greed? Lust? I didn't know. In all the years I'd known Jason Holloway I had never been able to read behind the frozen mask of his face. Nor had anyone else.

But now I seemed to be reading his mind. I could almost see him thinking of that long trip home, just he and Lora on the ship to-

gether and my carcass mouldering somewhere on this dead world.

He smiled in icy politeness. "Get the landcar ready, Mike. And make sure there's film in the cameras."

WE DROVE in complete silence through the cleft in the rocks, down the winding, rubble - strewn road into the dead city. I brought the landcar to a halt in what had once been a bustling thoroughfare.

"Okay. Let's get out here," he said.

I nudged the stud that lifted the top off the landcar and we climbed out. The green soup of the methane atmosphere whistled around our face - plates as we walked forward, side by side. I was sweating inside my suit. I knew Holloway had every intention of returning to the ship — and Lora — alone.

"Show me the crabs," he ordered.

I led him inside and pointed. He knelt, examined the curious skeleton perfunctorily, then stood up.

"Very interesting. Fascinating, in fact. We've stumbled over a treasure - trove here, Mike. Despite your objections, that is." I saw his brows furrow behind his face - mask. "What's that over there?" he asked, frowning.

"Where?"

"Leaning against that door. It looks like a book of some sort."

"Book? What book? I don't see —"

I moved closer, trying to see the object he was talking about. Suddenly I heard a harsh chuckle and my arms went rigid against my sides.

"Holloway! What —"

I half - turned and saw him holding a tanglegun in one space-gloved hand. As I turned, he fired again and the sticky unbreakable mesh wrapped itself around my legs. I toppled to the ground.

"Holloway, are you out of your head?"

"Hardly, Mike. Perhaps some time in the far future when this world is surveyed again you'll be found and the explorers will wonder where that Terran skeleton came from."

I started to sweat harder. "You must be crazy, Jay. This is all going down indelibly on the memory banks of our cybernetic monitor."

He only laughed. I said, "My name is Mike Ralston. I want it recorded that Jason Holloway has just tied me up in tanglecord and plans to kill —"

"Save your few remaining breaths, Mike. While you and Lora were out here finding the crabs, I took the trouble of rewiring some of the computer circuits back at the ship. Nothing that's being said

here is being recorded."

For a moment I couldn't speak. "You devil," I whispered finally. "You cold, calculating devil! I'd almost suspect you murdered your wife too."

"No. Grace's death was not of my doing, timely as it was. The return voyage to Earth should be a sad one for us, with four members of our expedition killed . . . but perhaps your wife and I can console each other for the loss of our respective mates."

His voice was like a string of dirty words. Unable to move, I glared up at him.

"You're just going to leave me here? To rot, I suppose."

"Indeed. For the record, I'll say we were exploring these buildings separately and I couldn't find you anywhere when it was time to return. It'll be three years or more before anyone comes back to this planet — and if they should stumble over your body, as is most unlikely, the tanglecord would have been long since dissolved by the atmosphere. They'll conclude you had a sudden heart attack, or something similar. Perhaps the methane will dissolve your spacesuit away and leave nothing but bones. I don't know."

He seemed casual about it. I thought of Lora, alone back there on the ship.

"Why don't you just kill me? Why leave me here like this? My suit won't run out of air for a week. I'll die of thirst and starvation before I choke!"

He smiled coolly. "Repayment, Mike. Repayment for the 10 years you spent married to the girl I loved."

He turned on his heel and left. Left me alone, in the blackness of a dead city on a dead planet, alone to face my thoughts while waiting for death.

"Damn you, Jason Holloway!" I shouted. It had been exactly as I expected, except that I hadn't foreseen his cleverness in rewiring the monitor. None of our damning conversation had been recorded. Back at the ship, Lora was probably beside herself at being unable to make contact with us.

Well, she'd soon know why, I thought . . .

I struggled against the tanglecord but it was no good. There's no way out of the stuff short of chemical dissolution — and I couldn't do that, trapped as I was. I rolled and grunted for a while, then lay still.

It was like going to hell alive. I counted seconds in the darkness, dreamed wild dreams of salvation. But not here, not on this dead world.

I was trapped for good. And Ja-

son Holloway was on his way back to the ship now. Back to the ship, and Lora.

I DON'T KNOW how long I lay there. It was probably minutes only, but it seemed like weeks.

And then I detected something moving.

Holloway, coming back to finish me off? Lora, out looking for me somehow?

I didn't know. But my sensitive audio pickups were pulling in a steady *chuffing* noise. I strained to see what was approaching.

Something alive. Something built low to the ground, and coming toward me.

Something that looked like a giant crab.

But this planet is supposed to be dead, I thought wildly. This must be a hallucination. I could see it plainly in the dim light trickling through the open windows. Almost the size of a man, with stalked eyes gleaming before it, and a voracious mouth.

Hallucination?

An additional terror created by a dying mind?

It matched the skeletons we had seen. It was as if my imagination had cloaked those dry bones with a living shell.

And then I felt it crawling over me, felt the skittering touch of real

claws against my spacesuit, and knew it was no hallucination. It was real — a last survivor of the civilization that had been, perhaps, coming to investigate the strange beings that had disturbed its peace.

I felt the heavy crab - being on top of me, a strangely unpleasant feeling. Then I saw its powerful jaws lower to touch my spacesuit.

A current of hope beat in me. Perhaps the jaws would pierce the suit, would let out my air and let me die in one peaceful burst instead of slowly, lingeringly.

The jaws met.

In the tanglecord! The creature was feeding—feeding on the sticky stuff that held me captive!

It was better than I could possibly have hoped for. I held still, desperately still, not wanting to frighten the being away until it was through. It munched away. *I hope you find it tasty*, I thought.

The crab - thing's appetite was enormous. Within minutes, I was free.

I rose, shakily, on fear - numbed legs. Suddenly the joy that had been growing within me winked out like a snuffed candle. I realized that even this freedom was useless. By now, Holloway was probably back at the ship, or perhaps the ship had even left. I was free, perhaps, but still marooned.

I looked down at the crab -

being; it glanced at me, then fearfully scuttled away into the shadow and was gone. The last survivor, I thought. The final remnant of the dead race that lived here. And soon my skeleton would be lying with theirs.

I stepped through the empty doorframe and into the blue - and - gold sunlight — and sucked in a breath sharply.

The landcar was still there!

And there was Holloway, his back bent double under the burden of a giant crab skeleton. I grinned. He was making his alibi complete by fulfilling his statement; he had carried out an independent search. Now he would return to the landcar, look for me. I would not appear. He would search and not find me; he would call on the suitmike, without success. And he would return sadly and list me as a martyr along with the rest, and then have Lora. . . .

Like hell he would! I clenched my fists and started to run.

I caught up with him about 10 feet from the landcar. He heard my footsteps, and turned. His face was white with terror.

"Mike! How did you —"

"Never mind," I said. I saw him let the skeleton slide to the ground and go for that tanglegun, but I wasn't going to be caught a second time. I leaped, and smash-

ed into him hard. The tanglegun slipped from his hands and dropped.

We rolled over and over together on the ground. I heard the brittle bones of the crab skeleton crack as we landed atop of it. His heavy gloves groped for my throat; I averted him and rolled over on top of him.

"Mike — Mike — don't —"

I smiled. "By rights I ought to leave you here the way you tried to leave me. But I won't. I'll bring you back to the ship and have you dictate a full confession — and then stand trial on Earth for attempted murder."

I reached out, picked up the tanglegun, and got off him. He came off the ground like a flash and sprang toward me.

I didn't have a chance to fire the gun. I could do nothing else but hold it snout forward and ram it into his faceplate as he charged.

The thick plastoglass cracked beneath the impact; I saw his startled eyes, heard him whimper, "*Mike —*" and then the air of his suit rushed out.

I turned away. I couldn't watch him strangle, devil that he was.

I left him there, a doubled - up corpse lying next to a crushed skeleton.

LATER, I CLIMBED OUT of the landcar — alone.

Lora looked near hysterics. "Mike! What's been going on? I haven't been able to hear anything from either of you! I thought you must have killed each other!"

"No such luck," I said.

"Where's Jason?" she asked suddenly. "Didn't he come back with you?"

"No," I said, sitting down heavily. Reaction was setting in, and I felt weak and quivery. "Jason won't be coming back."

"What happened?"

"I'll explain the whole thing,

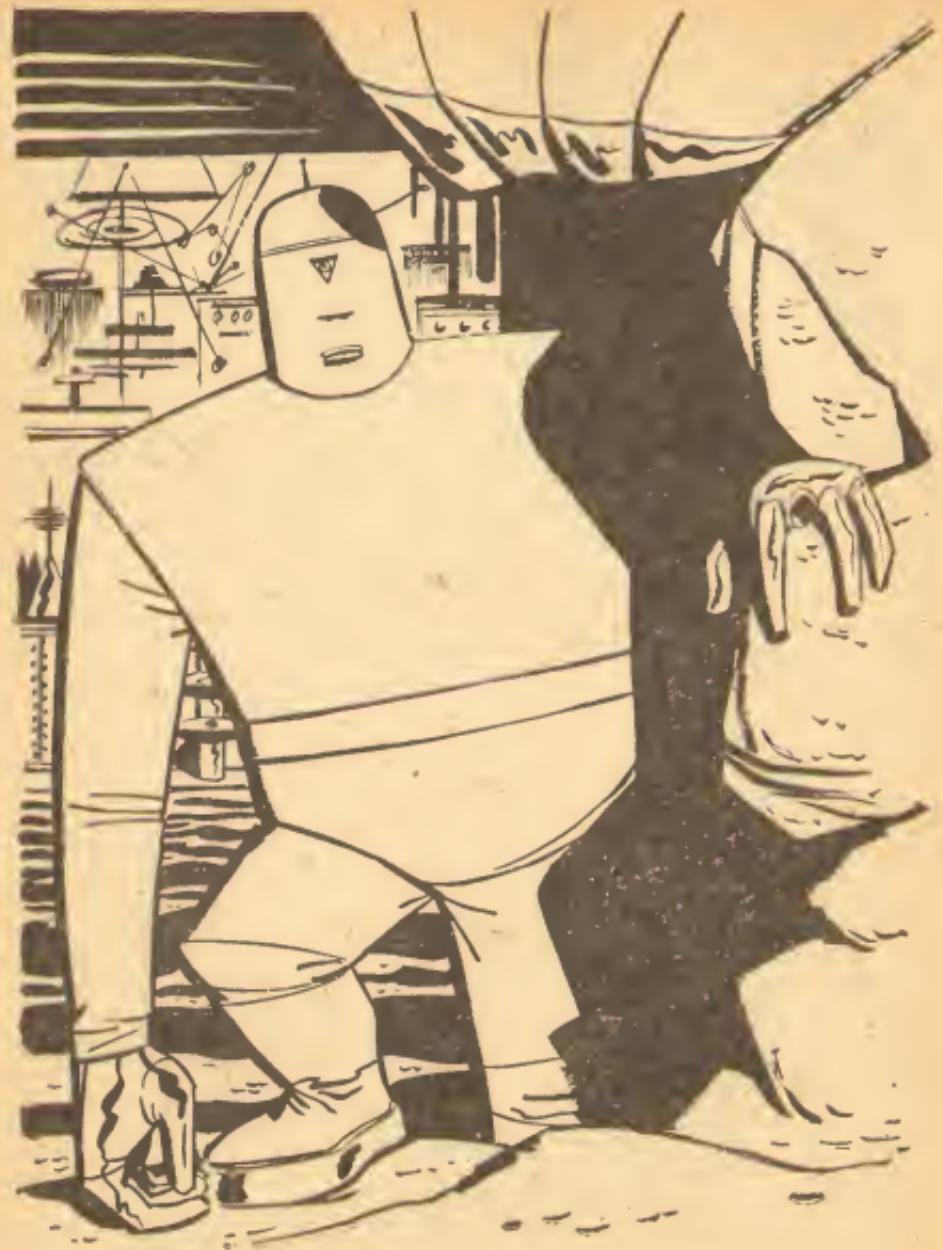
Lora. But Jason won't trouble us any more." Rising, I stared out the port at the bleak and barren landscape of the dead world.

"Jason's dead," I said. "Like this planet." Then I frowned, remembering the crab - thing scuttling away into the darkness. "No," I said, taking Lora into my arms. "This planet's not quite dead yet. There's at least one crab still alive out there, and we're both going to be eternally grateful to that crab because he liked the taste of tangle-cord!"

THE END



"Frankly, I didn't think a blowout would cause this much trouble."



Henderson knew only that something very strange was following him; something he could not see, yet tangible. Malar called it the-

Monster In The Night

by

Robert Moore Williams

"I MUST GUARD MY THINKING. Although he isn't quite sure of himself, this human, Henderson, is capable of reading minds!" the thought impinged on Henderson's consciousness. Intuitively he recognized that somebody — or some *thing* — was thinking about him.

As this realization sank home in Henderson's mind, cold sweat appeared on his body and a wind seemed to cut through him that had far greater chill in it than the river of cold sweeping over the roof of the Quonset hut. Carefully he laid the chemist's report back on the table. As he did this, his eyes flicked across the incredible piece of metal covered in the chemist's report.

The piece of metal was a flexible metal finger eight inches long. It had been found on a piece of barren ground that the wind kept free of snow. It was this piece of

metal that had brought Wayne Henderson flying hastily up from the States to this radar installation in the frozen wastes near the North Pole. What had lost a metal finger in this country? This was a question that the intelligence department of the United States Armed Forces wanted answered. And answered fast.

As Henderson started to turn in his chair, he was aware for the first time that he was not alone in the Quonset hut. Someone else was there! Someone who had entered so silently that he had not heard the opening of the door! Someone whose thinking he had picked up! Someone who thought of him as being human.

No man ever thought of another man as being human. This fact was taken for granted. But an alien would not make such a distinction!

Before he could turn completely

in his chair and see who was in the room, something hit him. *Wham!* Right behind the ear! His first dazed impression was that a mountain had fallen on top of him. He went out like a light extinguished in the arctic blast.

For an eternity, it seemed to him, Wayne Henderson was lost in the blackness of that polar midnight. Slowly consciousness began to return. The first facet of his personality that returned was his reasoning function. It told him that as he had turned, he had fallen out of his chair and struck his head on the floor. His reason did not tell him that this idea was preposterous. "But why am I so cold?" At this thought, alarm reactions began to appear in him. He struggled to regain full consciousness but slid back to the edge of blackness instead. Sounds came to his ears.

Thump, thump, thump — Footsteps! He tried to scream to call attention to himself. No sound came from his fogged throat. The footsteps faded into the distance, then came back again, changed.

THUMP . . . THUMP . . . THUMP . . .

These were not the same footsteps he had heard before. The tread was ponderous and heavy, almost like that of an elephant. What monster walked through the polar night with an elephantine

tread? Panic came up in Major Wayne Henderson. He listened to the heavy footsteps. Slowly they faded into the distance.

How could they fade into the distance inside a Quonset hut that was only forty feet long?

This thought jarred Henderson back to consciousness. Abruptly, he sat up. As he looked around him, he wished he was still unconscious.

Snow met his gaze in every direction. More was slowly falling from the night sky. The whole landscape was a directionless, distorted waste. He could see for a few feet. Where was the Quonset hut? Where was the radar installation?

He got wildly to his feet. Strain his eyes as he might, he could not see the radar installation, nor could he detect the giant webs that constantly swept the sky as they searched for possible intruders that might possibly carry atomic disintegration over the pole and down to America. This radar installation was one of many erected to guard the continent against death from the sky.

How had he gotten here? Had he wandered here in a daze, floundering his way through the snow drifts, reeling aimlessly, changing his directions dozens of times? If this had happened, he might be anywhere.

Or had he been carried out of

the hut and then escaped from his captor? Had the footsteps he had heard been made by someone who was looking for him? He thought the last idea was more likely, but in that case, who was searching for him? Who had slugged him in the hut? Who had been the second searcher? Wind colder than the polar air flowed over him.

He searched his pockets. Cigarettes, a lighter. No weapon. He had left his .45 automatic in the hut, laying it aside when he began his desk duties. There was something else in one pocket. He pulled it out. More by the feel than anything else, he recognized it as the incredible metal finger that had brought him here to this frozen land. Had the person who had slugged him stuffed the finger in his pocket? Had he been kidnapped because of the incredible piece of metal? Had — Again he heard footsteps moving through the snow. Hastily, without thinking he called out.

A hoarse voice answered him. "Henderson? Where are you?"

The voice was human. It spoke English. To Major Henderson, in this moment, nothing else mattered. "Here I am!" he yelled.

A LIGHT APPEARED and a man came moving toward him. Henderson recognized him by his

size. It was Malar, a civilian technician employed at the installation. He was a Serb, third generation in America, but he still retained something of the strange land from which his forefathers had come, the world where Asia and Europe had met for thousands of years. He was a giant in size and a bulldozer in strength. In common with all the men at the installation, the major had checked Malar's records. There was nothing against him on paper.

"Are you hurt?" Malar offered him a supporting arm. "Here, Major. Let me help you."

"I'm all right."

"What happened to you. You came running out of the hut as if the devil was after you. I tried to follow but you escaped from me."

"Somebody slugged me," Henderson said. He was still dazed and confused. "And —"

"Who did it?" Malar's deep voice managed to convey extreme doubt that this had ever taken place. "How could anyone have slugged you in the hut?"

"I — I had just picked up somebody thinking about me reading his mind."

"What?" The giant's voice was a hoarse grunt. "Have you gone nuts?"

"Perhaps," Henderson said. Again the thought came into his mind. "*He is on to me!*" This time

he knew its source. Malar! With an effort, he controlled his start of surprise. "Which — which way is the base?"

"That way." The giant gestured vaguely into the falling snow. "I still don't understand this. Who could have slugged you?"

"I said I don't know," Henderson answered.

"Is anything wrong at the base?"

"I can't answer that."

"You're an intelligence officer, aren't you? Something had gone wrong. That's why you were sent up here, ain't it?"

"How did you know about that?"

"It's talk among the men."

"What are they saying is wrong?"

"They don't know, but they're wondering if we've got a Red spy in camp."

"It's worse than that," Henderson said, then wished he had not spoken.

"Huh?" Malar seemed to loom larger in the night. "How could it be worse than that?"

"Forget I ever said that," Henderson said. "I'm still dazed from the blow I took back in the hut. And — Did you walk past me once or twice?"

"I walked by here but I didn't know I was walking by you."

"Then who was the second walker?"

"Huh? What's that? A second walker? Do you mean there is

somebody else out here?" Alarm put harsh overtones into Malar's rumbling voice.

"Yes," Henderson said.

"Where is he? Which way did he go?" The alarm in the big man's voice rose to the verge of panic. Abruptly he turned and sprayed the darkness with the bulky light he was carrying. "Which way did he go?" he repeated.

"That way," the officer said, pointing.

Malar's first inclination was obviously to go in the other direction, an impulse which he conquered with difficulty. As if drawn by an almost irresistible pull, he moved forward, focusing his light on the snow, then stopped abruptly.

Following him, Henderson heard the giant's breathing become heavy and tense. Looking downward where the light was pointing, he felt his own become heavy. Footprints were visible in the snow! They were like nothing the officer had ever seen, or had ever expected to see, on Earth. Not even the giant Kodiak bear would have made such prints as these.

"Give me your light," Henderson said.

The giant jerked away from the officer's grasping fingers. "No! *Thalud* might sneak up on us without the light!"

"What might sneak up on us?"

"*Thalud!* I — uh — That's an

old word for monster of the night."

"What do you know about this night monster?" Henderson's voice suddenly had the crack of a whip in it.

"I — nothing, Major."

"I think you do. I think you recognize those tracks."

"No. I mean, I don't."

"You're a liar!"

Malar took a step toward Henderson, one ponderous fist drawn back to hit, then thought better of this idea as the officer quietly asked, "Do you want to face a firing squad?"

"Nuts to that. I'm a civilian."

"When you came to work here, you signed papers subjecting yourself to full military discipline. This is a classified installation in a classified zone. You can be shot for your actions here and you signed papers agreeing to that."

"I didn't sign anything." Malar seemed confused and hardly aware of the meaning of the words he had heard.

"Then did you take somebody else's place here?"

"No."

"You must have. Otherwise you would remember signing the papers I mentioned."

"But —"

"What made those tracks?" The night air had revived Henderson and had swept the fog out of his mind. His strength was back and

his brain was clear. Facing this mystery, he fully intended to solve it.

"I — *Thalud* —"

AS MALAR SPOKE, Henderson realized that the giant was not really paying any attention to what he was saying. Instead, the big man was listening, intently, for some sound that he was either hearing, or was expecting to hear, in the night.

"What is it?" the officer snapped. His voice was suddenly tight and tense again. The chill of the arctic night suddenly seemed to penetrate his heavy clothing, cutting him through to the marrow of the bone.

"*Thalud* comes again!" Malar whispered.

Off in the distance, the officer was aware of a ponderous tread, coming closer.

"Run!" Malar's voice lost all of its bass notes and turned into a squeaky whisper. Turning, he ran.

"Halt!" If Malar heard the order he ignored it.

"Hell!" Henderson thought. "He the only clue I've got. If he gets away, I've lost it. I'm also lost myself." He followed Malar.

Ahead of him, the officer could hear the pound of Malar's flying feet. Behind him followed an even more ponderous tread. It moved faster and faster and it came on

relentlessly, tirelessly, like some ponderous Nemesis haunting its victim to death. As he ran, Henderson knew that the creature of the night was getting closer and closer.

Ahead, a low hill loomed up. Malar's flying feet went straight up the slope. Henderson followed. The top of the hill was barren rock. Here the wind had swept away all snow. The officer caught a glimpse of Malar's light going down the other side of the hill. Then the light, and Malar, went out of sight as if the Earth had opened and had swallowed them. Following close behind, Henderson tried to stop. Behind him came the beat of relentless feet over the barren top of the hill. As Henderson turned to glance back, his feet went out from under him and he fell forward into a snowdrift.

He fought for a footing in the soft feathery stuff. Somewhere he could hear Malar grunting and swearing and he knew the giant was in the same predicament. Getting to his feet, Henderson saw Malar vanish into a dark hole in the snow. He realized they were in the trench that led to a tunnel which penetrated the hill.

A tunnel here? Had the miners of the Alaskan gold rush of 1898 penetrated this far into the frozen northern wilderness? It seemed likely. Otherwise who had dug this trench and this tunnel here? Hen-

derson caught a glimpse of Malar's light in the tunnel beyond the trench. On the slope above him, heavy feet pounded. This sound made up Henderson's mind that he was going to join Malar, even if this meant that both of them were caught like rats in a trap. He pushed his way through the drifted snow. The giant was busy in the tunnel. As Henderson approached a grunt of satisfaction came from Malar.

Snap! The sound came from above and behind the officer as he slid into the tunnel. It was like the closing of heavy jaws. Something snatched at the back of his clothing. *Thalud!* Henderson leaped forward and collided with Malar. The giant swore at him and shoved him away. A backhanded blow from a hand as big as a ham struck the officer. Taken completely unaware, Henderson was thrown backward. His head struck the wall of the tunnel. Unfamiliar constellations of stars exploded before his eyes. He fell heavily, landing on a rough floor covered with broken stone.

Ahead of him, Malar was busy working with something. Watching, Henderson saw that the giant was trying to open a door. Metal creaked as unoiled hinges protested against turning. Malar grunted with satisfaction. A chunk of stone as big as a baseball clutched in

his right hand, Henderson got groggily to his feet.

Again the door creaked. This time it came fully open. The officer caught a glimpse of a blue glow ahead. The blue light was very dim but here in this Stygian blackness, it seemed very bright.

Beyond the door was a cavern! At the sight of what was in this cavern, Henderson blinked startled eyes. Here, hidden in an old mine tunnel in what he had thought was a wilderness of ice and snow, was equipment more complex than that of the radar installation itself. The equipment itself was different, it served some purpose which the officer did not grasp. There were no webs sweeping the sky for possible intruders coming in over the pole and no radar screens were visible. However, at a single glance, Henderson knew that this equipment was as far advanced scientifically as anything in the radar installation itself. Or possibly farther advanced.

This fact was impossible. Such equipment could not exist here in this barren land. It was incredible. It was also directly in front of his eyes.

The officer's first dazed thought was that here was proof that Malar was a Red spy. How else could the equipment in this cavern have come into existence? Its very presence indicated the existence of an ad-

vanced technology. But was that technology necessarily a Red product?

A second thought went through the officer's mind. The metal finger had either come from this cavern or was connected with it in some way. It was also a clue that might have led him here, if he had had an opportunity to make a thorough study of it. He had been slugged and carried into the wilderness of snow to prevent any possibility of the metal finger leading him here.

Then why had Malar brought him here? The answer was obvious. *Thalud* had forced Malar's hand.

Inside the cavern, Henderson caught a glimpse of the giant. Malar had vanished from sight. Now he was coming back toward the door. This time he had a weapon in his hands, a stubby device with a flaring muzzle and rings around a very short barrel. The officer crouched against the wall as Malar came out of the cavern. The giant brushed past him without seeing him. At this moment, Malar had more important things on his mind than an intelligence officer — *Thalud!* The night monster was occupying all of Malar's attention.

What was *Thalud*? Why did Malar fear the monster so much? How had the creature gotten here in the frozen north? Questions

flicked through Henderson's mind. He had no answer to any of them.

As if he knew exactly what *Thalud* was and how to deal with him, Malar stalked toward the exit of the tunnel. The weapon with the rings around the barrel was held firmly in both hands. Henderson could hear him muttering curses as he moved. He had left the door of the cavern open and light from it streamed past him, revealing not only the giant but also snow filtering downward outside in an infinity of tiny flakes. Snow and silence. The only sound was that of Malar's heavy boots clumping on the rocky floor of the tunnel.

The giant reached the entrance and looked up.

A HAND REACHED DOWN toward him. It caught him and jerked him upward. *Thalud* had been waiting there at the entrance to the tunnel, waiting like a wolf for his prey, waiting in silence in the night. Henderson caught a glimpse of Malar's writhing, twisting, jerking body being pulled upward into the darkness. He also saw dimly the tremendous arm that had closed its grip around the giant.

The arm was like nothing the intelligence officer had ever seen on Earth before. Or had ever imagined.

Malar screamed again, in the

night, a wailing yell of utter terror that pierced Henderson's ear drums like a thrown knife.

The scream was followed by a puff of light as brilliant as the explosion of an atom bomb. It made the night as bright as noon. Flaring out of nowhere, it was gone as quickly as it came.

With strained ears and abated breath, Wayne Henderson waited for the sound of the explosion. It did not come. There was no sound. Like an explosion of a gigantic photo-flash bulb, the light had flared soundlessly, then had vanished.

The puff of light had taken place outside of the tunnel and Henderson had seen only the reflection of it. Otherwise he would have been blinded.

Then— sounds began to come. The first was the sodden thump of a falling body. Henderson had no doubt as to the identity of this sound. He had heard this sodden thump too often in his career as an intelligence officer to mistake it. Flesh and blood fell like this.

He also saw the body fall that made the sound. Malar! The giant fell into the trench beyond the entrance to the tunnel.

Henderson started forward, then stopped. Out there another body was falling. The second body fell ponderously, heavily, with a clanking and a creaking and a clattering, fell as if it was made of metal.

Slowly, Henderson realized what had caused the flare of soundless light: the discharge of the strange weapon that Malar had carried outside. The giant had managed to pull the trigger. The result had been the death of *Thalud*. Dying, the monster of the night had released his grip on Malar, with the result that the giant had fallen into the tunnel excavation ahead of *Thalud*. The monster of the night had itself fallen a few seconds after Malar.

Both lay in the trench now. Dead? Wounded?

A groan came from the trench. Curses followed it. Listening and watching, Henderson saw Malar pull himself to his feet. After that, the giant seemed to go crazy.

Berserk with rage, Malar began kicking the dead body of the creature he had called *Thalud*. At the top of his voice, he screamed at it, shouting imprecations until the tunnel rang with the sound of his curses.

Whatever *Thalud* was, there was no question that Malar hated it. Finally he pulled himself away. Muttering to himself, he came into the tunnel.

As Malar passed Henderson, the officer hit him in the back of the head with the chunk of rock which he was holding in his right hand. Henderson struck with all the strength he possessed.

The giant fell forward. He struck his head against the edge of the door facing, writhed, twisted to his back, tried to rise, and fell back heavily to lie without moving. Henderson found another rock, to hit again, but saw that it would not be needed. He stepped hastily past Malar into the cavern, looking for something with which to tie the man. He had no illusions about the giant. Malar was only stunned. If he awakened, he would reenact the thunderous rage he had displayed against *Thalud*. This time Henderson would be its victim. The officer had clear mental pictures of his body being stamped

A coil of flexible cable caught Henderson's eye. This would serve his purpose. He had no time to examine the contents of the cavern. This would have to wait until later, when a full-scale expedition could be brought here from the base. How the eyes of the radar engineers would pop open when they saw what was here! Scientists and electronic specialists would be flown up from the United States to examine this equipment. Their eyes would pop open too!

Quickly, the officer wrapped wire around Malar's wrists and ankles. With many groans and grunts, the big man recovered consciousness. Squatting just inside the cavern door, the officer began his questioning.

"Who are you?"

Malar glared at him from hate-filled eyes. Henderson had the impression that the eyes were actually transmitting rage, on twin radio beams, as if Malar expected to destroy him by transmitted hate alone. Goose flesh crawling all over his body, the officer recoiled.

"You go to hell!" Malar did not speak the words, he spat them from his mouth. Trying to sit up, he discovered that his hands and feet were tied.

"You're not going anywhere," Henderson said.

MUSCLES BULGED like heavy ropes in Malar's shoulders as he tried to break the wire. Then he recognized what had been used to tie him. "A single strand of this would hold an elephant!" he shouted. His rage increased in fury.

"We do not know how to manufacture such wire on Earth," the officer said.

"Who said it came from the stupid resources of your backward planet?" Malar screamed in reply. Realizing he had said too much, he was instantly silent.

Squatting on his heels, Henderson felt wave after wave of cold pass over his body. In spite of the gentle heat that flowed from the cavern itself, the temperature here was low, but the cold that Hen-

derson was feeling came from another source. Here was proof that Malar was an alien from some other world.

"What planet did it come from?"

Malar did not answer. The twin beams of hate from his eyes increased in intensity.

"I'll take you back to the base," Henderson said. "We'll smoke the truth out of you there." His voice was as cold as the river of ice passing through him.

"Will you carry me there?" Malar said.

"I'll bring snow buggies and haul you back," the officer said, with a confidence he was far from feeling.

Malar laughed grimly. "How will you find your own way back? The snow will bury all tracks."

Henderson was silent. The giant had touched the truth. The officer did not know which direction to go to reach the base. To wander aimlessly in this kind of a storm was madness.

"There will be signal equipment in the cavern," Henderson said. "That weapon of yours made a fine light."

"It is broken," Malar shouted.

"Then I will modify some of the equipment in the cavern so that it will transmit radio signals," the officer answered. "Any kind of a signal is certain to be detected and monitored as to direction. Men

from the base will find me." A note of triumph rose in his voice.

"You will get yourself killed if you pry around in there," Malar answered. "The cave is - - - How do you say it? - - *booby-trapped* to blow up anyone who tries to enter it." His voice had a jeering note in it, but his eyes were suddenly uneasy. Some of the hate went out of them, to be replaced by a growing fear.

"In that case, we'll both be blown up," the officer said. Rising, he moved into the cavern.

Uneasy trepidation was rising in him. Malar might be telling the truth. Dozens of booby-traps of which he had no knowledge could exist in such a place as this. When he had entered to get the coil of wire, he had barely gone beyond the door. Perhaps he had just been lucky in avoiding triggering a booby-trap the first time!

A sound came from behind him. Turning, he saw that Malar, with tremendous dexterity, had managed to slip his wrists through the coil of wire and had freed his hands. He was busy unwrapping the wire from around his ankles.

Henderson leaped at Malar. An elbow caught him in the ribs, knocked him backward into the cavern. There was tremendous power in the blow. Henderson struck a bench and fell heavily. Before he could rise, Malar was

on his feet and was advancing toward him.

There was no mistaking Malar's intentions. The hate in his eyes was a living light. Henderson tried to rise. A heavy boot caught him in the face.

"Ho!" the giant shouted. He not only intended to destroy this human but he also intended to enjoy doing it.

Henderson, dazed, unable to rise, clearly saw the arm reach through the doorway behind Malar. He saw the hand. *It had a missing finger.* The officer's first bewildered thought was that he was hallucinating, that this was a distorted vision seen as consciousness collapsed and death came.

The hand and the arm came out of the tunnel. The fingers closed around Malar's neck.

The scream that came from Malar's throat made Henderson realize that if he was hallucinating, so was the giant. The scream that came from Malar was wrenched from a throat in mortal pain and agony.

A second hand and a second arm came out of the tunnel. This went around Malar's thick chest and closed there in a relentless grip. The two hands began to pull against each other.

Malar twisted and tried to turn.

The strength in those arms and hands seemed to be beyond human

comprehension. They pulled at Malar, and kept on pulling. No matter how the giant twisted, he could not free himself. His screams echoed through the cavern, making the night hideous with sound.

Abruptly, the screams ended. Gurgling sounds came instead. Malar's arms flailed at the air.

Then stopped flailing.

Henderson, staring from goggling eyes, saw what had happened. Malar's head had been pulled from his body. So tremendous had been the strength in the arms that had caught him that even flesh and bone had been powerless to resist.

BLOOD SPURTED from arteries and veins torn asunder from the trunk. Red flesh gaped. White bones glistened.

The hand that held the head released its grip. The head fell like a pumpkin on the floor. It made a squishing sound as it struck. It rolled a few inches, then was still.

The hand that held the body released its grip. The body fell. It made a sodden heavy noise. The sounds that followed were those of blood spurting from broken arteries. These sounds spurted themselves into slow drops, then into silence.

Henderson got slowly to his feet.

Thalud entered the cavern.

Henderson stared at the monster without moving.

Thalud was not over six feet tall, but he was almost as broad as he was high. The squat body gave the impression of tremendous strength. His arms were as long as his body. He had no mouth and no nose. A single eye in the center of his forehead glittered with coruscating points of light. The eye came to focus on Henderson with terrible intensity. The long arms moved toward the officer.

"Hello, *Thalud*," Henderson said. "So you are a robot!"

The words, shocked out of him, sprang involuntarily from his lips.

The robot's single eye continued to stare at him. He wondered if his words had been heard. Perhaps *Thalud* had no means of receiving audible vibrations that human ears registered as sound.

The arms stopped moving.

Henderson took a deep breath. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the strange piece of metal. "This is one of your fingers, I believe." He handed the piece of metal to *Thalud*.

The single eye came to focus on the piece of metal Henderson was extending. A flicker of recognition, perhaps even of gratitude, appeared in it. The right arm moved. Lightly the heavy fingers lifted the piece of metal from the officer's hand.

"Where did you come from?" Henderson was hardly more than a whisper.

"Up there." The answer came in the form of a thought flowing into the officer's mind. A slight gesture of the left hand indicated the roof of the cavern. Beyond that were the skies of night and the infinitely vast seas of space.

"I hunt him." The left hand gestured downward toward Malar's lifeless body. "He is one of a group of outcasts that fly between the stars. He worked his way into your station to discover its purpose. This cave is one of the places where they hide. They bring loot from your planet here, then wait for a ship to come. The ship then takes it home."

"Ah!" Henderson said. The grunt conveyed no real meaning but it was deep with understanding. "Then that is why he knew who you were and why he ran from you."

"Yes," the robot answered. The single eye continued to study the officer. A change appeared in it as if understanding and perhaps fellowship, the kindred feeling that goes with a common calling, had come into the mechanistic mind of the robot.

Or was he mistaken, Henderson wondered. Was he reading his own hopes into a stray flicker of a

photoelectric cell?

The robot's voice came into his mind. "You, too, are of my calling. In a way, we are both detectives seeking to root out the evil forces of our Universe."

"Yes," Henderson whispered. He wet his lips.

"Then you understand how it is that we must deal with thieves and killers." The left arm flicked downward toward Malar's still and lifeless body.

"I certainly do," the officer answered. "We would have given him the same medicine, if we had caught him."

"Good," the robot said. "I will now take you back to your base. Then I will destroy this cavern, then back to the skies." As easily as he would have lifted a child, the gigantic arm swept the officer from his feet and found him a resting place on a metal shoulder. Henderson rode there until, through the snow of the night, the lights of the radar installation were visible. Here Thalud stopped and gently set him down.

"I go now," the robot said in a soft tone.

Henderson stood watching as the giant form vanished into the snow. Slowly the pound of the heavy feet faded into the silence of the night.

THE END

Killer First-Class

by

Randall Garrett

As a member of the Killers' Guild, Donovan held one of the highest skills on all the planets; but it was the type of job a man could die from . . .

THE EARTHTHMAN FIN-gered his emblem, the tiny, razor-keen beryllium dagger mounted on his lapel, and said, "All right. I'm here. What's the job and how much can you pay?"

In the plush armchair, the weighty alien stirred restlessly, sighed, belched. "First things first, Earthman. Are you Lyle Donovan, of the Killers' Guild?"

"I am."

"Prove it."

Donovan pointed to the dagger on his lapel. "My emblem is all the proof you need."

"I hope so, Earthman."

"About this job, Kro Hjalaz: start talking. I'm a busy man."

Kro Hjalaz chuckled harshly. "You Earthmen are always in a hurry. We of the Antares worlds live more slowly. But I'll come to the point, Donovan. I want you to kill someone for me."

"Naturally. Who?"

"Ree Ledroz, Earthman."

Donovan stared coldly at the gross bulk of the Antarean for a moment, without making reply. Ree Ledroz was an important figure on Antares IV; he was co-ruler, holding supreme power in alternate years. This was Kro Hjalaz' year to rule and Ree Ledroz was somewhere in the North Continent, waiting out his year of retirement. Only two weeks more and Hjalaz would step down to be replaced by Ledroz in the governmental see-saw.

Donovan frowned speculatively. "Ree Ledroz, eh? Big game, Kro Hjalaz! You hunt well this year."

"I'll pay well, too, Earthman," the alien said icily. "Your job is to kill, not to comment. Will you take the job or won't you?"

"It'll cost you 10,000 credits."

A momentary flicker of anger tightened the alien's soft cheeks.



"You come high, killer."

"The price varies with the importance of the quarry and the wealth of the employer. You can pay, Kro Hjalaz. 10,000 credits."

The alien sighed. "And if I refuse? If I send for some other member of the Guild?"

"Your price is already recorded at Guild headquarters," Donovan said. "We of the Guild don't underbid each other. There isn't a Killer in the galaxy who'd touch the job for less than 10,000.

Kro Hjalaz was silent for almost a minute. Finally he said, "Very well. The 10,000's yours. What assurance do I have that you'll go through with it?"

Donovan tapped the beryllium dagger on his lapel significantly. "Here's your assurance," he said.

"All right, Donovan. You're hired. But if there's any slipup—"

There wasn't any need for Kro Hjalaz to finish the sentence. The cold menace in his eyes was enough.

Donovan grinned. "Don't worry, boss. The man's as good as dead right now. You can give me 3,000 on account and I'll pick up the other seven when Ree Ledroz is dead."

DONOVAN NODDED CURTLY to the alien, rose, and left without a further word. He strode to the end of the corridor, took

the tube down, and moments later found himself in the crowded street.

Antares was at high noon, a giant red glow diffused over half the sky. The streets were packed with people, aliens of all kinds (including a few Earthmen) and the green-skinned humanoid Antarean natives.

Donovan spied a *cholla* - stand at the far side of the street. He crossed, bought one of the warm, faintly opiated sticks of gelatin, and gave the vendor a coin. Casually he turned and saw a heavy, well - armed Antaréan try to slip out of sight behind him.

One of Kro Hjalaz' men was following him.

Well, it wasn't surprising. Kro Hjalaz evidently wanted to make sure he got value for money, with 10,000 credits at stake. Donovan could hardly blame him for that. But still, he liked to carry out his work in privacy. He resolved to dispose of the Antarean at the earliest possible moment.

But now a couple of jobs awaited him. First, a stop at Guild headquarters; a tradition for any Killer going out on a job. There was always the chance some comrade might have information to aid him.

After that, a visit to the library to examine photos of the victim, read biographies of him if any

existed — in short, to get to know the marked man well. A 10,000-credit killing had to be carried out with great professional skill and Donovan was at the top of his profession.

A current of pleasure tingled through him. He was beginning the hunt again. It was all he lived for, the pattern of pursuit followed by the bloody climax — and then payment and it began all over with some new victim. There were plenty of people with motives for assassination throughout the vast spread of the galaxy. A member of the Killers' Guild never went without work long.

Donovan finished his *cholla*-stick and casually sauntered up the street, noticing that his Antarean follower was keeping pace. Idly, Donovan edged between a hard-shelled Vegan and a blue Arcturian, turned the corner, and ducked into a shadowy alcove between two buildings.

As he expected, the Antarean came after him, peering in all directions, trying to find the quarry that had so easily shaken him.

"I'm over here, friend," Donovan called mockingly.

The Antarean whirled. "What —?"

"Tell your master that I don't like to be followed. No — better still - *I'll* tell him. This way."

Donovan drew his knife and performed a complex flashing figure which the Antarean was barely able to see. The climax of the maneuver came when the knife plunged between the double hearts of the alien being. Donovan caught the great bulk as it toppled forward and dragged it back into the darkness. The Antarean had never stood a chance against the highly developed skills of a professional Killer.

Smiling in satisfaction, Donovan wiped his knife clean, stepped out of the shadows, and headed rapidly down the street. He entered the tubeshaft and moments later stepped out in front of the local headquarters of the Intergalactic Killers' Guild.

He flashed his emblem at the door and the unsmiling Lactanian doorman let him through.

Inside, Wingman, this year's president of the Guild, was reading through some reports.

"Hello, Lon," Donovan said. "Did you get my report?"

"Came over clear as a bell, Lyle," said Wingman. A little-known fact about the Guild was that the beryllium emblem was also a high-power ultrawave transmitter in contact with local headquarters. "When are you leaving to knock off Ledroz?"

"Soon as I get enough data on

him. Anyone here know anything?"

Wingman shrugged. "Ledroz is somewhere in the North Continent but no one knows where. I checked some of our records for you but couldn't find anything."

"Thanks," Donovan said. Wingman was a Killer on inactive duty, due to his term in office, and he aided in Killer - research in his spare time. "I guess I'll get down to the library, then. I want to get the dope on the man before I start hunting for him."

"Right."

Donovan reached in his pocket and took out a 200 credit piece and two fifties. "I collected a 3,000 credit advance from Hjalaz. Here's the Guild's share."

Each Killer ungrudgingly turned over 10 per cent of his fees to the Guild, in return for the protection and shelter the unity of the Guild offered. Wingman silently took the money and noted down the fact on a pad near his desk.

"There's a girl waiting inside for you," Wingman said when he was through.

"Girl?"

The president nodded. "She heard Ledroz was marked for killing and wanted to talk to the Killer. I told her I'd let the Killer see her if the Killer didn't mind. Do you?"

Donovan shrugged. "I guess it

doesn't matter much. I'll wear an identity shield. Where is she?"

"Office 102."

Donovan donned the face-blurring identity shield, saluted Wingman, and pushed open the inner door.

THE GIRL IN OFFICE 102 rose to meet him as he entered. She was tall, lovely, wearing a clinging yellow tunic that molded tight against her hips and firm breasts. She was an Earth girl.

"You asked to see me? I'm the Killer assigned to Ree Ledroz."

"Hello, Donovan. You can take off that silly identity shield; I know who you are."

Donovan recoiled in astonishment. "What? How could you possibly —?"

"I know a little about the Guild and I've watched some of its men in action. I'd know that pair of shoulders anywhere, with or without an identity shield."

Donovan removed the shield and regarded the girl gravely. "I could have you mind-burned now, you know. For that matter, I could kill you myself."

The girl paled but said, "I know. I don't intend to give away your secret, Lyle."

"How do I know that?"

"Because you don't have any secret. You're not going to kill Ree

Ledroz!"

Donovan's broad face lit up in a derisive smile. "Oh? Are you going to do the job for me? Or is he dead already? Who are you, anyway? You seem to know me, but—"

She flushed. "I'm Bette Furness of the Terran Embassy on Antares. Under-attaché in charge of Terran-Antarean relations."

He eyed her youthful body speculatively and said, "You're much too pretty to be a lady diplomat."

"Thank you. But I'm not here for compliments." She leaned forward, almost touching Donovan, and he caught his breath sharply at the sweet scent of her perfume and the warmth of her nearness. He moved back involuntarily; Killers tend to refrain from the entanglements of sex. It complicates their tasks.

"What are you here for, then?"

"Listen to me, Donovan. The man who hired you, Kro Hjalaz, is an enemy of Earth and all Earth stands for. We've intercepted some of his secret plans. He intends to kill Ree Ledroz, via you, and maintain rule over Antares all the time—not every other year. And one of his first acts after disposing of his rival and grabbing permanent power will be to launch an attack on Earth!"

Donovan eyed her blankly. "Go on," he said.

"Ree Ledroz is a moderate, a wise and good man. Last year we were on the verge of negotiating a long-range peace treaty between Earth and Antares when Ledroz' term expired. Naturally we couldn't get anywhere when Hjalaz took over. But Hjalaz' term is up in only two weeks and then we can deal with Ledroz again. Unless," she said, "you kill him."

"My job is killing," he said unemotionally. "I've been hired by one man to kill another. I don't know anything about these political maneuvers."

Her eyes blazed angrily and Donovan felt a twist of desire cut through him at her show of rage. "Political maneuvers!" she repeated bitterly. "We can avoid a costly and destructive interstellar war and you call them political maneuvers! Lyle, you're an Earthman. Don't you want to spare Earth the agony of war?"

"I'm a Killer," he told her. "My only loyalty is to the Guild. I happen to be an Earthman only by an accident of birth. Since the age of 12 I've lived in the outworlds, learning my trade."

He rose. "Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

"No—no," she said, flushing again.

"Very well, then. I have to get about my business, I suggest you forget this entire conversation and also the fact that you know the identity of the man who's going to kill Ree Ledroz. If you want to stay alive, that is."

Again her eyes flashed in rage, "Thank you, Mister Donovan," she said acidly. "Thank you—and goodbye!"

LATER THAT DAY, in the vast Antares Municipal Library, Donovan felt that some of his usual calm was deserting him. He didn't like the sensation.

For one thing, he had the idea all eyes were on him, that everyone was silently saying, *There's the man who's going to kill Ledroz.* He hadn't felt that way since his second or third job, years ago.

It was all because that girl knew his identity, he thought savagely. He realized he should have killed her, there in the Guild office. It was highly irregular for anyone to go at large after learning a Killer's identity.

He should have knifed her as coolly and as easily as he had the Antarean who had been following him. But his mind recoiled from the idea. In all his long career he had killed just three fellow Earthmen and no Earthwomen at all. Somehow he wondered if he could

kill Bette Furness if he had to.

Sweat started to pour down his body. It was the first sign of a Killer's deterioration, when he began having moral qualms about his task. He forced himself to read the book he had requested.

The calm alien features of Rée Ledroz stared upward at him from the page. As he had done so many times before, Donovan imprinted every detail of those features on his brain, inscribed their minutest blemish on his memory. When the time came for the kill he didn't want to be misled by a double.

But as he stared at the page, another curious emotion stole over him. Ree Ledroz' face was not only calm, it was benign; it was *good*. Uncomfortably, Donovan saw that he had taken the money of a rogue and would be killing a man of worth.

Well, so what? he asked himself viciously. *We don't ask questions in our line of work. Hjalaz paid for a job; I'm going to do it.*

Still, conflict raged within him. He compelled himself to read the encyclopedia's biography of Ledroz, read all of the man's accomplishments in his 10 years of rule over the past two decades. He balanced Hjalaz out well; he lacked the fat man's ruthlessness and cunning, but made up for it in warmth and tact. Together they had forged

Antares into a galactic power.

And now Hjalaz wished to dispose of his co-ruler and use that power against Earth. The image of Bette Furness floated into Donovan's mind, telling him, "*Lyle, you're an Earthman. Don't you want to spare Earth the agony of war?*"

His fingers shook and cold sickness clawed at his stomach. A solicitous librarian came over to him and whispered, "Sir, do you feel all right? We have an infirmary 'on the twentieth level if—"

"No. That's all right," he forced himself to say. "Just a passing thing; I'm fine now." He closed the encyclopedia and handed it to the librarian. "Put this away for me, will you?"

"Of course, sir. Is there any other book I can get for you?"

"No. No, thanks."

On leaden feet he left the library.

OUTSIDE, he sucked in some fresh air and tried to clear his head. It was no good. What he had always feared, what he was sure would never happen to him, was happening.

The crackup.

It came to all Killers eventually, they said. After years of blood, of joyful killing, there came a moment when the hand wouldn't obey the mind, when the mind itself rebelled

at more death. And somehow, unexpectedly, that moment had caught up with him now.

Damn that girl, he thought. She did it to me. I could kill her.

Or can I? Weakly he moved along the street, not even bothering to see if he were being followed. The street swirled before his eyes; reality danced.

Only one thing was certain: he could not kill Ree Ledroz.

Somehow he made his way to a public communicator booth and forced a coin into the slot. Then, as the image of Kro Hjalaz took shape on the screen, he compelled himself to return to full self-control.

"Well, Donovan? The job done? It's fast work if you've taken care of it."

"The job's not done," said Donovan. "Something's come up. I'm not going to do it."

"What?"

"You heard me. The Guild will refund your 3,000, and you can hire someone else. I'm leaving Antares immediately."

"You can't do this, Donovan. You made an agreement."

"And I'm breaking it. What of it?"

"You're the best man in your business. I don't want a bungler for the job. What's wrong with you, Donovan?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I have to leave Antares and I won't have a chance to do your job. Contact the Guild; they'll send you another man."

"I won't allow this, Donovan!"

"You'll have to," Donovan said firmly, and hung up.

He stared at the dead screen for a moment afterward, thinking. He would go to the spaceport; he would buy a ticket for some other world. He'd go to Vega, or Sirius, or Alpheratz, and register with the local Guild. And he'd try to forget all that happened to him on Antares.

I'm not through yet! he thought. Once I get away from here, from that girl with her accusing eyes, from fat Kro Hjalaz—

He stepped out into the street and hailed a passing jet-cab.

— "Antares General Spaceport, driver. And fast!"

THE SPACEPORT was crowded, as always. The shimmering snouts of half a dozen mighty space-liners were visible beyond the administration buildings, out on the landing-field itself. Donovan felt strangely naked without his Guild emblem but he had decided not to wear it again until he was on some other world, until he had regained in his own eyes the right to wear it.

"One ticket to—ah—Betelgeuse VI," he said, shoving one of Hjalaz' 500-credit pieces under the window. He had left his own money in the Guild bank and later, from his new-world, he would authorize Wingman to withdraw 3000 and repay Hjalaz.

The clerk took the cash and handed Donovan a square purple ticket and two or three small coins in change. "You leave on the Starship *Indefeasible* at 1300," the clerk said.

"Thanks."

Donovan pocketed the change, stowed the ticket in his billfold, and turned away. 1300 was half an hour from now. He glanced around uneasily, wondering if Hjalaz might not have some ideas about him. A Killer who backed out of a job was always suspect; Hjalaz might have decided to dispose of him on the odd chance that Donovan could be potentially dangerous.

He squinted and wondered if the Antarean loafers he saw some thousand yards away at the refreshment-booth were following him. Could be; he decided to take no chances. He moved smoothly toward the entrance to the landing field.

A robot waited at the door. "Ticket, sir?"

Donovan fumbled in his wallet and produced the ticket. The robot

scanned it and said, "The *Inde-feasible* is not loading for another 10 minutes, sir. Would you mind waiting in the anteroom to your left?"

The Earthman scowled; he didn't care to get ambushed in the terminal and he knew he was safe once he got aboard that ship. But there was no use arguing with the robot. He debated making a dash under the robot's arm and out onto the field.

"Mr. Donovan," a voice said.

He was so amazed he nearly went for his blaster. Somehow he got control over himself and turned to see who had spoken.

It was the girl. Bette Furness.

"What the devil do you want?"

"We tapped your call to Hjalaz," she said. "Then we traced you here. I don't know what made you change your mind, but I just had to come out here—to thank you—to—"

"Never mind," he said. "I'm leaving. I'm not doing the job. Don't make a fuss over me."

"Sorry. It's just that—Lyle, Earth will always be grateful to you."

"Grateful? What the hell for? Hjalaz will just hire someone else to do the job."

"Perhaps we can persuade him the same way."

Donovan eyed his watch. It was nearly time for the ship to start

loading and he was impatient. He didn't want to talk to Bette Furness any more. He wanted to get aboard, far from the ominous-looking trio who seemed to be doing nothing at all, there at the far end of the terminal.

Possibly they were in the pay of the Terran Embassy, he thought. Possibly the girl had hired them to rub him out, just to remove all possibility of his killing Ledroz. Possibly she was stalling him until they could maneuver into a good position. They seemed to be edging nearer now.

"My ship's going to be loading, soon. I'm going to Betelgeuse. There'll be work for me there."

"Work? Oh—you mean—"

"Killing," he completed. "If you'll excuse me now, Miss Furness—"

There was something she seemed to be trying to say. "Donovan—Lyle—I want to tell you—"

Whatever it was, she didn't finish. Donovan saw now that the three Antareans were moving toward him rapidly and there wasn't much doubt of their intention. Donovan turned and ran, ducking under the robot's outstretched arm and racing out onto the hard brown soil of the landing-field.

He looked back and saw that his three followers had gone past the astonished robot as well. Dono-

van drew his blaster as he ran, and ducked behind a fueling-truck that stood beneath one of the huge ships.

As the three approached he fired at the biggest and ugliest. The blaster beam caught the Antarean amidships, charred a black-edged hole through his blubbery belly and knocked him 10 feet back toward the terminal.

The other two split up and managed to lose themselves in a tangle of machinery. Donovan looked around tensely, wondering where they were.

And then he found out. They came rushing at him at the same time from opposite directions, knives drawn.

Donovan heard a scream. *Bette Furness?* He didn't have time to look. His blaster rose and he ashed the Antarean approaching from the left, just as the other one cracked heavily into him and drove his knife into Donovan's shoulder.

There was the icy fire of pain stiffening his arm. Donovan wrenched away, feeling hot blood soaking through his shirt. The blaster dropped from his numbed hand. The Antarean raised the knife again, ready for a final stroke.

With all his catlike skill, Donovan leaped back and the blow fell on empty air. The Antarean growled in annoyance. Donovan

took two skipping steps forward and brought his toe upward in a perfect dropkick. The knife flew out of the alien's hand and travelled some 20 feet in a shining arc, embedding itself upright in the ground.

Now they were both without weapons. The Antarean was big and burly and Donovan's right arm was almost useless from pain.

But Donovan had the advantage of years of training in the toughest profession there was. He had been up against worse odds than this before.

He allowed the Antarean to rip two brutal, punishing body blows into him. Gasping for breath, fighting back nausea, Donovan spun away and recovered. The pain in his stomach helped to neutralize the stinging fury in his arm. It was an old technique. The body could feel just so much pain, and if he could divide it—

Ignoring the twin pain-centers in arm and stomach, Donovan went into the dancing pattern of attack he had learned so many years before. The Antarean followed him dimly, like a large bear, as Donovan forced his tired body to bob and weave in a fast-moving pattern.

Suddenly a fist exploded before the Antarean's face. The alien staggered and tried to fight back but his enemy was untouchable.

Donovan waltzed behind the big Antarean and brought his fists down hard on the thick neck. The alien rocked and grunted in anger. He turned clumsily, and Donovan drove his one good arm deep into the creature's belly. The alien gasped, tried to recover his breath. Donovan hit him again, hard, and while the alien reeled dizzily the Earthman crashed a fist upward from his knees with all the strength he had.

There was a clicking sound, and the alien's head snapped back grotesquely. Neck broken, the Antarean tumbled to the ground.

Donovan sighed in relief. Then someone cried, "Look out, Lyle!" and he knew the battle still had not ended.

A SPURT OF ENERGY shot over his head and splatted against the fueling-truck. Donovan looked around and saw a fat alien peering toward him, endeavoring to get a clearer view.

It was Kro Hjalaz.

"I've got you, Earthman. You'll be dead in a minute. You're too dangerous to leave alive."

"Come get me, Hjalaz! Put down that gun and fight me the way your bully-boys did."

The Antarean ruler chuckled. "I'm not as mad as all that." He fired again, and again Donovan

ducked. Sweat cascaded down his body; his arm and the pit of his stomach ached. "You're in the pay of Ledroz, aren't you?" Hjalaz demanded. "He hired you, outbid me for you. You thought you'd play both sides for all they were worth."

"You're crazy, Hjalaz."

Another bolt of energy sang overhead. Hjalaz was finding the range; another couple of shots and—

"Lyle! Here!"

Donovan was astonished to see the girl, Bette Furness. She was holding the blaster Donovan had dropped.

"You idiot—you want to get killed?"

"I saw the gun lying here. Hjalaz will kill you!"

"Why so quiet in there, Earthman? You're still alive, aren't you?"

"Unfortunately for you, I am." Donovan grabbed the gun in his left hand. It was a good thing most Killers were ambidextrous, he thought. Cautiously he leaned around the edge of the fueling-truck.

Hjalaz was taking aim—at the fuel tank! If he got that shot off it would mean an explosion that would finish Donovan and the girl at once.

Donovan brought the blaster into firing position just as Hjalaz' hand

tightened on the trigger. The Earthman fired.

One shot was all a Killer needed.

"He's dead," Bette Furness said.

"So he is." Donovan stared at the gun dangling from his hand. He was limp and exhausted. Where was the glory of the kill, he wondered, the thrill of death he used to feel? Gone.

He turned to the girl. "Well, it worked out swell for you, didn't it? Hjalaz is dead and now I suppose Ledroz will rule by himself. There won't be any war." Hollowly, he looked away. "And I'm out of a job."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I—can't kill any more." The words stung his lips as they emerged. "Something's happened to me. And you did it! If I'd killed Ledroz, as I was paid to do—no: you were right. I would have done

something terribly wrong if I'd killed Ledroz." The admission surprised him, but he knew it was true.

He felt the girl's lithe fingers probing his slashed shoulder. "You're wounded, Donovan."

"So? What's it to you?"

"Lyle, don't you understand? I—I—*love* you!"

He started to snap out an angry sarcasm but suddenly saw the girl's eyes. He bowed his head. "You love a Killer?" He chuckled. "No . . . that's wrong."

Donovan seized her fiercely, pulled her to him. "You love an *ex*-Killer," he said. Letting go of her, he drew his Guild emblem from his pocket, stared curiously at the beryllium dagger and let the now-useless trinket fall to the blood-soaked ground.

He would never wear it again.

THE END



Eternal Truths



PEOPLE WITH A nodding acquaintance with mathematics and philosophy often conclude that these subjects deal with the eternal verities, indeed, *are* the eternal truths themselves. Nothing could be further from fact. If anything, mathematics and the philosophy of the subject have been changing so rapidly that students

find difficulty in seeing from one decade to the next a continuity they'd ordinarily expect to associate with such stable work.

Mathematics at times, seems as if it is a logical structure built on shifting sands. If that metaphor sounds unfair, it is not. The foundations of mathematics are full of unresolved paradoxes. The classic

"the barber shaves all in Seville who do not shave themselves -- does he shave himself," is so familiar as to be trite. Yet even in the calculus of classes this is unanswered satisfactorily.

That arithmetic preserves its elemental logical nature seems to be without question. Never the less, the nature of number, the very core of mathematics is unstable. Does two and two equal four. It depends -- it depends . . . Surely the limited system of applied ma-

thematics when put to the test of the physical world responds with sureness and delivers the things we can see. But this is not the nature of the problem.

The Institutionists, those radicals of mathematics, keep injecting questions which the rationalistic "game-players" would rather ignore -- but cannot. Mathematics seems at times like a Chess game, but chess is not mathematics.

If you want verities do not go to mathematics -- go to poetry!



"My ship is now completely demolished, and I urge that no one try to rescue me from this horrible planet. . . sob. . . farewell."

OUTPOST PERIL

by

Robert Silverberg

Ten of them had left the crippled starship and landed on the alien world. Now they awaited help. That is, nine waited—the tenth plotted . . .

THERE WAS A GREEN-shelled Rigelian crab-man scuttling up the hill toward the dozing Chet Lloyd, who was guarding the small Terran outpost. Lloyd was tired, terribly tired; the Earthmen had been under siege by the crabmen for more than a week, and the pace was starting to wear on the men of the outpost.

He sniffed the fishy odor of the Rigelian while still half-asleep, and it immediately dragged him up from drowsiness. He came wide awake in an instant — just as the razorkeen pincers of the ugly crab-man started to descend toward his throat.

The Rigelian was clicking its mandibles in joy — but the joy was premature. For choking down his revulsion at the alien, Chet Lloyd threw himself backward, out of the creature's reach, and snatched out his blaster.

The alien clucked in anger as it saw the glint of the weapon. Scuttling madly, it made a desperate suicide charge as Lloyd fired.

The blaster beam licked out and bathed the Rigelian in purple fire. Slowly, relentlessly, Lloyd played the beam over the advancing alien. The Rigelian glowed cherry red, but still it kept coming, its deep-buried reflexes defying the reality of its death.

"Die, why don't you?" Lloyd yelled. He was backed up as far as he could go, against a fungus-encrusted *zorg*-tree, and the crab-man kept moving. It was a hideous sight, cooking alive and still moving.

It came within a foot of him and he lashed out with his boot. The blow caught the crisped alien solidly, and the Rigelian collapsed. Quivering, Lloyd held the blaster beam on the corpse for a full minute, until the last possible sign of



life was extinguished.

Then, still numb with shock, he holstered his blaster, gagging. The smell of the dead crabman was overpowering. He took a couple of dazed steps away, behind the tree where the air was cleaner. Sucking in fresh air, he cleared his mind — and remembered.

He began to run toward the outpost.

"Dave! Hal! Out here, on the

double!"

At his cry, two men in the blue-and-gray uniforms of the Space Legion appeared from the bubble-building in the background. They ran toward Lloyd.

"Great Scott, Lloyd, what's happened?"

Wordlessly, Chet pointed.

"A Rigelian?" Dave sounded totally incredulous. "How could it get through the force-barrier?"

"Yeah," the other Earthman said. "The force-field is supposed to keep us fully protected. What's going on?"

"I don't know," Chet said hoarsely. "All I know is that thing came crawling right through our supposedly impregnable barrier — and two seconds more and it would have slit my throat!"

IN SIDE THE OUTPOST, Chet Lloyd sat behind the electronic console cabinet, sweat streaming down his face and body. He checked the resonating circuits a second time, then turned to face the nine tense, nervous people ringed around him.

"The circuits are fine — now. But someone must have tampered with them! There's no other way a Rigelian could have gotten inside that barrier."

"Impossible, Chet!" The voice belonged to Marian Laurence, an ICS reporter who had been on the ill-fated liner *Altair* when it cracked up on Rigel IV. Like the other nine, she was marooned here waiting for the rescue ship to arrive — and the force-barrier that protected the little outpost from the menacing aliens without spelled the difference between life and death for her and all of them.

"Why impossible, Marian?"

"Because — well, it just doesn't make any sense! You said yourself

that someone had to tamper with the circuit, that there's no mechanical failure in it. But — who would do such a thing? Why, it's suicide to let the Rigelians in! You know as well as I that they kill Earthmen on sight."

"I know," Lloyd agreed. "And it doesn't make sense, maybe. But that doesn't eliminate the possibility of a sellout."

"Sellout?" It was Dave Morgan, along with Chet and Hal Reynolds one of the three crewmen who had survived the crash. "Seems unlikely. We've only been here eight days. Who would have been dealing with the crabs?"

Lloyd shrugged. "I didn't name anybody. I just said it's the only explanation for what happened."

"Forget that for a moment," said grayhaired Walter McDougal, an elderly passenger. "How do we know it won't happen again? Are we safe? If one Rigelian could get through the barrier, why not the whole army of them?"

"We'll just have to keep regular guard," Lloyd replied. "I'll confess that I was so confident of our barrier that I was dozing a little when the Rigelian came through. We can't have any more of that now. We'll have to stay awake, and watch, and keep blasters and needlers ready for immediate use. Once those crabs get a foothold here, we're finished."

He turned around and studied the circuit panel moodily for a moment. Then he rose and left the room.

He walked out to the front of the bubble-building and stared out over the grotesque alien landscape as if searching for stealthy crab-men. *It just doesn't make sense,* he thought.

Earthmen didn't sell other Earthmen out. The Terrans, as dominant race of the galaxy, had a certain code of ethics that was kept. There was neither rhyme nor reason for any of the nine people inside the bubble-house to have played quisling to the crabmen.

And yet —

The circuits had been tampered with. Someone had introduced an oscillating baffle-filter that blanked out the force-field circuit at predictable intervals, and then had passed the word along to the aliens somehow that the field was down. Only fast action had saved his life — and if he had fallen beneath the crabman's clutching pincers, by now the rest of the castaways would be dead as well. Except, of course, for the lone Judas.

But who could that be? Chet Lloyd frowned angrily. No Earthman could have any conceivable motive for selling out nine fellow humans to a race of totally alien beings. Something was wrong. Something made no sense. Some-

thing —

He gasped. The tangle of vegetation that surrounded the little outpost was writhing, and suddenly was alive with crawling, scuttling Rigelians — and they were moving on through the barrier as if it did not exist at all!

"Battle stations!" Lloyd yelled desperately.

They blanketed the ground like so many loathsome slugs, moving ever forward in their repulsive sidewise scuttle. Chet Lloyd stationed himself at the forward gun; at his side was Hal Reynolds, and Dave Morgan was somewhere around back of the bubble-build-

ing. Lloyd raked the ground with a barrage of explosive needles, and the nearest line of aliens crumpled and rolled over, scraping their tiny scale-encrusted legs against the sky before dying. "More ammo," he muttered. Behind him, Marian Davies appeared with three more clips of needles, and began feeding them into his gun.

He heard the savage bark of Reynold's gun to his left, and another band of aliens fell.

"That's it," Chet said. "You fire, and then I will. Keep in turn. That way, one of us is always firing while the other's re-loading, and they're under constant bombardment." As he spoke, he discharged his own clip, then hastily

reloaded while Reynolds fired. From around back came the steady report of Dave Morgan's gun.

The bodies were beginning to pile up, forming a living barrier around the embattled Terran outpost. Still they kept coming, motivated only by their mindless hate for Earth and all things Earthian.

As he fired, Chet Lloyd reflected bitterly that this was all his fault. He hadn't checked the circuits deep enough; somewhere beyond his probe the barrier was really jimmied, and cleverly — so cleverly that it had seemed workable again, until the moment he had turned away. Then the horde had descended.

He turned to Marian Davies. "Girl, can you take the gun for a few minutes?"

She paled, but said, "Sure, Chet. What's up?"

"I think we've got them on the run, and I want to go in and repair the barrier. Can you hold the fort?"

"I'll try," she said.

CHET LLOYD DASHED inside and ran to the control panel. This time, working frantically, he managed to yank out a whole series of cryotrons and rewire the circuits. The jimmying job was a damn clever one, he had to admit.

It had been fixed so the force-

field would blink off for a ten-minute period, then return for an hour — and then cut off for five hours. He shuddered at the damnable ingenuity that had set the thing up.

He had been fooled into thinking they were safe twice — first when he had relied on the infallibility of the forcefield, second when he had examined the control panel and concluded that the field was working again. Now, he was going to make sure. As the sound of gunfire echoed in his ears, his trained fingers wove the microscopic strands together, bringing the barrier back into being.

There was a flash of light as the pilot-beam told him the field was working again. It was confirmed a moment later when Hal Reynolds yelled from outside, "The field's on again!"

He went outside. Marian was still crouching over her gun, firing with grim determination at the ever-growing heap of crabmen piling up outside.

To his relief, Lloyd saw a number of crabmen scratching futilely at the air about two hundred yards away. That meant the barrier was down; they were cut off from the aliens by an invisible shield a hundred feet high surrounding the outpost. Now, the only job remaining was to pick off the aliens stranded inside the compound —

and then find the man who had let them in.

He squeezed Marian's shoulder and said, "Good job, kid. I'll take over now."

She stood up, a little wobbly. "That's a lousy job," she said.

"I know. Killing's always lousy."

He slid in behind the heavy gun and inserted a clip of needles. Then he began to fire.

The crabmen were in rout, running frantically toward the barrier that now bottled them up with certain doom. Lloyd picked them off one by one, conserving the ammunition as well as he could.

It was all over in ten minutes. At least five hundred crabmen lay dead or dying within the stockade, their bodies blasted and contorted by the effect of the tiny needles that had exploded with demonic force after penetrating their hides. Shaking, Lloyd rose from the gun.

"It's over," he said.

"It sure is," Hal Reynolds said. "Except for the job of shoveling all those things away. We'll choke in a day if we let them rot here."

Lloyd nodded. "As soon as it looks safe, we'll lift the barrier and dump them outside. Then we clamp down tight — and start looking for our quisling!"

CHEP LLOYD LOOKED at the nine weary faces of his fellow castaways. "Let me review

the situation," he said tiredly. "We were all bound for Procyon aboard the starship *Altair* when the ship blew a gasket. Ten of us, assorted sheerly at random, escaped in a lifeship and came here. We had nothing in common except that we were all Earthmen. Three of us were also crewmen aboard the *Altair*; the rest of you were passengers.

"We landed here. Using our survival kit, we erected this bubble-house, fortified it with weapons taken from the lifeship, set up a force-barrier to keep out the natives, who hate our guts. We then radioed for help, and were told it would arrive in two weeks."

"Why are you telling all this, Chet?" Dave Morgan asked.

I want to make sure everyone knows what's going on," Lloyd said. "Evidently one of us has forgotten he's an Earthman."

Morgan scowled, but said nothing. Lloyd went on. "Okay. All we had to do was wait till the rescue ship got here. But one of us didn't want to wait. He got in touch with the crabmen somehow, told them what he was going to do, and then queered the force-field. The crabmen came marching in. This time, we threw them back — but we used up almost all of our ammunition doing so. If we ever get an attack like that again, we're dead men."

"And you think that one of us sold out to the aliens?" Hal Reynolds asked.

"I not only think it," Lloyd said. "I *know* it."

"Do you have any ideas?" Marian Laurence asked.

"There are three major suspects," Lloyd replied. "Any of them could have done the job."

Nine people glanced at each other uneasily. A tense silence enfolded the group.

"Would you care to name your three suspects?" Dave Gorman asked quietly.

"I would not," Lloyd said. "But I advise all of you to keep your eyes opened. And starting now, we're going to have twenty-four hour guard: one person standing outside, looking for aliens, and one in here, guarding the force-field controls. Is that agreeable?"

"It's the only way," Walter McDougal said. "I'll volunteer for first shift."

"Very well. You stay here and watch the controls. I'll go outside."

The alien world's eight moons were dancing an eerie minuet as Lloyd paced through the final hours of his watch. Half an hour more and he would go inside and awaken Dave Morgan, who was scheduled to relieve him.

It was still hard for him to believe that someone had betrayed them, but it was the only answer.

And there were just three people in the group with enough knowledge of electronics to have done the work on the force-field.

One was Dave Morgan. He had been the *Altair's* radioman; certainly, he would know how to jimmy the apparatus.

The second was Hal Reynolds. As a crewman, he would have the necessary knowhow.

And the third was Chet Lloyd. Lloyd knew in his heart that he could never consciously bring himself to do such a thing, but there was always the chance, on an alien world, that he had been under some sort of telepathic control from outside. So little was known about the crabmen that it was possible, if not likely. He couldn't count himself out as a possible suspect.

But which of the three had done it? And, more impossible to discover, *why*?

Lloyd didn't know. He paced the circuit of the bubble-building again, peering into the moonlight blackness for some sign of a menacing alien, searching for an answer. No answer came. And he knew he had to find one before the unknown betrayer found some way of lowering the barrier again. This time, there would be no defense against the hordes of crabmen.

He whirled. Someone was stirring inside the bubble-building. He

wasn't due to be relieved for another twenty-five minutes. Perhaps it was Selmer Dubrow, the passenger who was patrolling the force-field controls.

He peered in. No—it wasn't Dubrow. The portly passenger was dimly visible far in the back of the building, sitting opposite the control panel with his back to Lloyd.

No. The figure moving within the bubble-building, tiptoeing stealthily, was tall and blonde and clad in Space Legion uniform. It was, Lloyd saw, Hal Reynolds.

Chet Lloyd stiffened. Reynolds was wearing a thought-converter helmet, and carried another in his hands! He was obviously on his way to parley with the aliens!

So Hal's the traitor, Lloyd thought regretfully. It didn't seem possible. He and Reynolds had shipped together for years. Why would —

But there was no point in debating it now. The man was caught red-handed; Lloyd had to stop him now, and worry about motives later.

He yanked open the entrance hatch and ran inside. The unsuspecting Reynolds was continuing to tiptoe through the main room, heading for the other hatch on the opposite side. Lloyd moved silently up behind him.

Reaching out, he grabbed Reynolds by the arm and whirled him

around.

"Chet! I've —"

Lloyd didn't wait for explanations. His fist connected solidly with Reynolds' jaw, knocking him down. "That's for quislings," Lloyd grated. He picked Reynolds up, measured him for a blow, started to swing.

"No, Lloyd! You don't understand! I'm not —"

Again Chet hit him. This time Reynolds sagged and fell limply. Lloyd took the thought-converter from his hand and drew his blaster.

Reynolds stirred and opened one eye. "Put the helmet on, Chet," he said. "I just wanted to show you —"

"What are you trying to say, traitor?"

"I'm *not* the traitor," Reynolds said. "Put the helmet on and you'll see!"

Suspiciously, Lloyd donned the converter-helmet while continuing to cover Reynolds with the blaster in his right hand.

And suddenly —

Alien thoughts.

Cold, icy hatred.

Coming from within the bubble-building.

Coming from the mind of the thing they had known as "Dave Morgan."

"See what I mean?" Reynolds asked.

"I put a helmet on just on a

hunch — and that's what I picked up!"

"Sorry, Hal," Lloyd said. "I acted too quickly. Let's go get him!"

AS THEY HEADED toward the sleeping-quarters, Chet Lloyd understood. The thought-converter translated Terran into alien tongues, alien into Terran—but it also acted as a detector for the presence of alien life.

And whoever Dave Morgan was, he wasn't a Terran. He was an alien, hiding behind a Terran body. But he couldn't hide the alien thoughts of his sleeping mind.

They reached the sleeping-quarters, holding drawn blasters.

"We'll go in there and get him out," Lloyd whispered. "We can't risk a fracas with all those innocent people asleep in there."

"Right."

They holstered their blasters and went in. There were seven sleepers—eight, if you counted the slumbering Selmer Dubrow, supposedly on guard at the controls. Dubrow had slept through everything that had just happened.

Lloyd reached Morgan's cot and looked down. He shivered slightly. It was hard to believe that the man they had shipped with was an Earthman only skin deep.

Chet shook Morgan's arm. "Wake up, Dave. It's me—Chet."

Morgan stirred. "Huh? What is it?"

"Come on outside. I see something interesting."

"Lemme alone. I wanna sleep."

"No—come on!"

Reluctantly, Morgan climbed out of the cot and rubbed his eyes. *Just like a human.* Lloyd thought.

The three men left the sleeping-quarters and went into the adjoining room. Suddenly Lloyd drew his blaster, and Reynolds likewise.

"What's going on?" Morgan demanded. "You two gone nuts?"

"Not at all," Lloyd said coldly. "Suppose you tell us what planet you're really from, Mister Quisling."

Astonishment rippled over Morgan's features for an instant—and then he leaped. Straight at Reynolds, bowling him over. Hal's blaster went flying away into a dark corner of the room.

The two men went into a tangle on the floor, while Lloyd was forced to hold his fire for fear of hitting Reynolds. He holstered his blaster and joined the conflict.

Morgan seemed inhumanly strong, but Lloyd was able to pull him off Reynolds. Morgan's fist crashed into Lloyd's stomach, but Lloyd caught his breath and knocked Morgan against the far wall with a quick kick.

He drew his blaster and started to squeeze the trigger.

And Morgan *changed*.

The blaster-beam spurted over the thing's head as Morgan became a flowing pool of protoplasm on the bubble-building's floor, then turned into a thing with a dozen arms and legs that leaped upon Lloyd with wild fury. Lloyd jabbed his blaster upward as the being swarmed on him, managed to pull the trigger.

He felt warm radiance, and the creature let go. Lloyd jumped back and bathed the thing that had been Morgan with the blaster-beam until there was nothing left on the floor but a sizzling pool of fluid that quickly evaporated.

Sickened, he turned away.

Everyone was awake now. Holstering his blaster, he looked at their pale, shaken faces, and knew his own must be showing utter

horror. He licked his dry lips.

"That was our traitor," he said quietly, as if pronouncing his epitaph.

"What—what was it?" Marian Laurence asked hesitantly.

"A Sirian spy." Lloyd's voice was hoarse, and his stomach felt ready to heave. "Sirians hate Earthmen as much as the Rigelians do. He—he took over poor Morgan's body some time before we crashed. Then he must have sneaked out one night with a thought-converter and negotiated an alliance with the crabmen to wipe us out."

"Lord," Walter McDougal said. "Right in our midst."

Lloyd managed to force a grin. "But we're safe now. And we've got a job to do to get off this planet. Let's get to it."

1.



2.



New Year's Eve — 2,000

by

Ivar Jorgensen

As the seconds ticked by on this fateful night, George Carhew's fears increased. At the stroke of midnight what new world would begin?

GEORGE CARHEW glanced at his watch. The time was 11:21. He looked around at the rest of the guests at the party and said, "Hey! Thirty-nine more minutes and we enter the Twenty-First Century!"

Abel Marsh squinted sourly at Carhew. "How many times do I have to tell you, George, that the new century won't begin for another year? 2001 is the first year of the Twenty-First Century, not 2000. You'll have to wait till next year to celebrate that."

"Don't be so damned picayune," Carhew snapped. "In half an hour it'll be the year 2000. Why shouldn't it be a new century?"

"Because—"

"Oh, don't fight over it, boys," cooed Maritta Lewis, giggling happily. She was a tall brunette with wide eyes and full lips; she wore a clinging synthoplast off-the-

bosom blouse and a sprayon skirt that molded her hips and long legs. "It's whatever century you want it to be, tonight! Twentieth! Twenty - first! Don't get an ulcer, dad. Live it up!"

She climbed out of the web-chair she had been decorating and crossed to the bar. "Come on, you two gourches. What kind of drinks can I get you?"

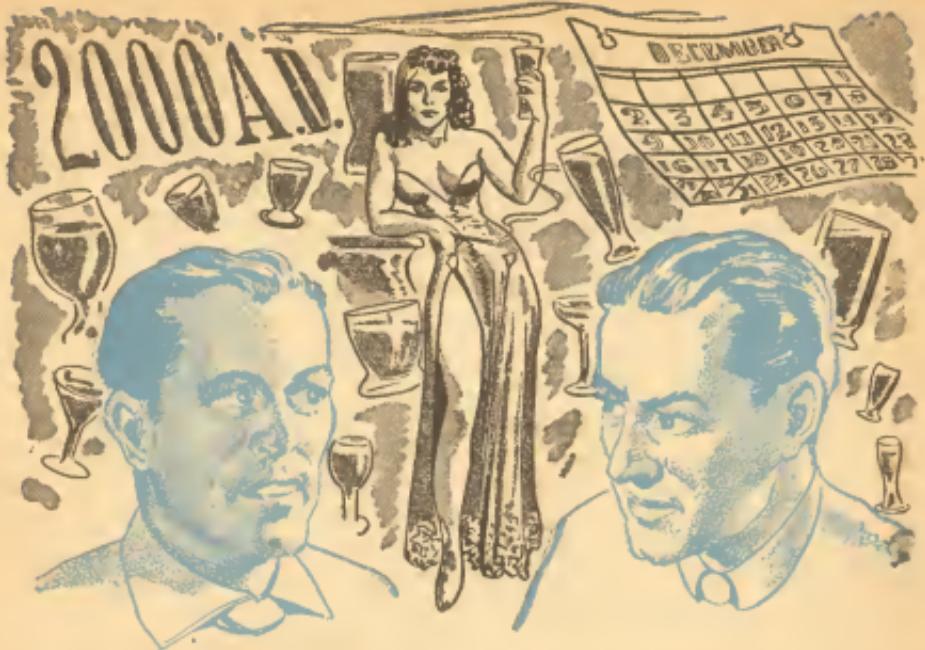
"Dial me a Four Planets," Carhew said.

"Okay, spaceman, How about you, Abel?"

"Old - fashioned whiskey sour for me. None of these futuristic drinks." He grinned. "I still believe it's the Twentieth Century."

Maritta dialed the drinks and carried them back across the room to the two men, narrowly avoiding spilling both when a wildly dancing couple pranced past.

Carhew took his drink, observ-



ing the firm swell of the girl's breasts before him. "Care to dance, Maritta?"

"Why — sure," she said.

He sipped at the hopefully-named Four Planets, then put it on the low ebony table near him and stood. Maritta seemed to float into his arms. She wore some new scent, pungent and desirable.

Carhew drew her tightly to him and the music billowed loudly around them. They danced silently for a while.

"You seem moody, George," she said after a few moments. "Something troubling you?"

"No," he said, but from the tone

of his voice it might as well have been "Yes."

"You worry too much, you know? I've only known you for an evening and I can see you're a worrier. You and that man you came with — that Abel. Both of you stiff and tense, snapping at each other about nothing at all. Imagine, quarrelling over whether next year is the Twentieth or the Twenty-First Century!"

"Which reminds me . . ." Carhew glanced at his watch. "It's 11:40. Twenty minutes to midnight."

"You're changing the subject. Why don't you come down to Dr. Bellison's when the holiday's over?"

Carhew stiffened suddenly. "*Bellison!* That quack? The mystic...!"

"You don't understand," she said softly. "You're like all the rest. But you haven't experienced Relativistic Release, that's all. You ought to come down sometime. It'll do you a world of good."

FEELING CHILLED, Carhew stared at the girl in his arms. Heldwig Bellison's Relativistic Release philosophy was something new, something that had come spiralling out of Central Europe via jetcopter in 1998 and was now busily infecting all of America.

He didn't know too much about it. It was, he knew, a hedonistic cult, devoted solely to pleasure — to drug-taking and strange sexual orgies and things like that. It seemed to Carhew, in the room's half-light, that the girl's eyes were dilated from drugs and that her face bore the signs of dissipation. He shuddered.

No wonder she was so gay, so buoyant! Suddenly he no longer felt like dancing with her. He moved mechanically until the dance was over, then left the floor and headed for his seat.

"You still haven't answered me, George. Will you come down to the clinic when the holiday's over?"

He sipped at his drink. "Don't

ask me now, Maritta. Wait till later — till I'm really drunk. Then ask me. After midnight. Maybe by then I'll be anxious to see Dr. Bellison. Who knows?"

She giggled. "You're funny, George. And Abel too. What do you two do for a living?"

Carhew exchanged a glance with dour Abel Marsh. Marsh shook his head imperceptibly.

"We're . . . designers," he said. "Draftsmen. Sort of engineers."

"Sounds frightfully dull."

Carhew was glad she didn't intend to pursue the line of questioning too much further, "It is," he said.

He raised the Four Planets to his lips and drained it.

"Be a good girl, will you, and get me another drink?"

"Sure. One Four Planets, coming up."

"No," he said. "This time I'll have a screwdriver — with lots of vodka."

"Switching drinks in midstream, eh? Okay, if you want to live dangerously!"

Carhew studied the girl's trim form as she crossed the room to the bar. She was a lovely, languorous creature; pity she belonged to that rotten cult. Carhew wondered how many men she had recruited already. He and Marsh had had time for very few dates in the past

three years; he knew little about women. Tonight was their first really free night since 1998.

And even tonight, tension hung over them. An unanswered question remained to be answered.

Carhew glanced at his watch. "Eleven forty - nine," he said. "Eleven more minutes."

"Eleven minutes to A. D. 2000," Marsh said.

"Eleven minutes to the Twenty - First Century."

"Twentieth."

"Twenty - first."

"Twentieth!"

Maritta reappeared with the drinks.

"Are you two still bickering over that silly business?" she asked. "You're like a couple of babies. Here's your drink, George."

Carhew took the drink from her and gulped at it, almost greedily. The vodka affected him rapidly; he felt his head starting to spin.

"Well," he said, "Twentieth or Twenty - First doesn't matter much . . . anyone got the time?"

"Eleven fifty - one," Marsh said.

"That means — nine more minutes." Carhew finished his drink. "I think I'll have another one," he said.

HE WEAVED HIS WAY across the room to the bar and dialed

his own — a Martini, this time.

He sensed warmth behind him and turned to see Maritta pressing gently against him. "You'll get sick if you keep switching drinks," she said.

"Maybe I want to get sick," he said. "Maybe I see this whole sick crazy drug - ridden world and I want to get just as sick as it is." *I'm getting sober*, he thought. *Don't want to do that.*

He made out the time dimly. Eleven fifty - five. Five more minutes. Five minutes to the Year 2000. Dull tension started to mount inside him.

"You look awfully worried," Maritta said. "I really think you should see Doctor —"

"Told you not to ask me that until after midnight. Wait till I'm good'n drunk. Maybe I'll say yes then."

He finished his cocktail, laughed crazily, and let the glass fall to the floor. It crashed against the leg of an iron table and shattered tinkling. "Too bad," he said. "Guess I broke the glass. Guess so."

"You're drunk," she said.

"Good. But not drunk enough."

The room was starting to blur around him now; couples whirled by in a wild dance and he could hardly see. From somewhere, the music began again.

"Let's dance," he suggested, and

staggered forward into the girl's arms.

They danced. While they spun around the room, someone turned on a radio. The announcer's voice said. "Ladies and gentlemen, the time is now Eleven Fifty - nine. In just one minute the world will welcome a new year — and a new century, some claim, though purists insist that —"

Yeah, he thought. Purists like Marsh.

Somewhere inside his mind he was conscious that he ought to be at the window, looking out, when midnight came. He had one minute. Less than that, now. Fifty seconds. Forty-five. Forty.

Maritta's lips touched his in a lingering kiss. He felt her body straining against his, while somewhere within him his mind went on counting. Thirty - five. Thirty. Twenty - five.

Twenty.

"Excuse me," he said thickly. "Gotta go look out the window."

Fifteen.

He sensed Abel Marsh standing next to him, pressing the button that would clear the opaqued window and make it possible for them to look out.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

The window cleared. Outside the night was black except for a few billion city lights and the round

silver dollar up above that was the moon.

Seven. Six.

A current of excitement started to build up in Carhew. He saw the girl clinging to his arm. The three of them stared outward at the silent skies.

Five. Four. Three. Two.

ONE!

"It's twelve midnight," the announcer said. "We enter the Year 2000!"

Suddenly a bolt of light split the sky — a shaft of white flame that leaped up from the Earth and sprang through the heavens, lighting up the entire city and probably half the continent. A burning searing bolt of light.

Carhew felt suddenly sober. He looked at Marsh.

Behind them, the radio blared: "We bring you now a special announcement relayed from White Sands Rocket Base. One minute ago, at the stroke of midnight, the Rocket Ship *Moonflight* made a successful blastoff. It was the first time in the history of humanity that man has broken forth from the bonds of Earth in a manned spaceship. We expect to bring you further bulletins throughout the night. Landing on the moon itself is scheduled for Eight a.m. on New Year's Day."

Carhew was smiling. He looked

at Abel Marsh, his fellow engineer on the subject. "Well, we made it," he said hoarsely. "The ship took off."

"Happy New Year!" someone yelled. "Happy New Century!"

It didn't matter much now, Cartew thought, which century this was. Not now. Twentieth or Twenty - First, it made no difference.

All that counted was that this was the Age of Space.

THE END



"Come quick, professor—we've created a beautiful monster!"



A department for all our readers throughout the world; here you can meet new friends who are interested in the same things you are. Listings are free, so send in yours today!

STOCK BROKER EMPLOYEE

Alan T. Shelley: 26 7th Ave., Laval West, Que., Canada

Age 18: "I am employed with a stock broker and attend college at night. Have been an s-f fan for some 6 years. Hobbies include philately, camping, and reading; am also interested in astronomy, dancing, pop and light classical music, water sports, and am a fanatic football fan. Wish to hear from anyone with similar interests."

STUDENT

Miss Jan Bryan: 3433 Redding Rd., San Diego 15, Calif.

Age 17: "I'm 5' 4" with light brown hair and blue-green eyes—and am wild over s-f. Would particularly enjoy hearing from other people of all ages who are interested in outdoor sports including swimming and water skiing. Love bowl-

ing, play chess, and enjoy Harry Belafonte. Abhor Elvis Presley. Math, science, and drama are my school majors."

WIDOW

Patricia Kinnan: Rt. 1, Box 148, Packenham Trailer Park, Chalmette, La.

Age 25: "I'm a widow with a 13 month old daughter; I enjoy s-f, horses, dogs, swimming, music (all kinds), people—and just about anything. Would enjoy hearing from anyone."

ART STUDENT

Pat Haines: 5715 Fernwood, Hollywood 27, Calif.

Age 19: "I'm an art major in Los Angeles City College, mad about s-f, and enjoy fencing, reading, sports cars—driving, riding & racing. I would like to hear from col-

lege kids all over who have similar interests."

RESEARCH CHEMIST

Rudolph A. Orosz: 2822 Stanfield Dr., Parma 29, Ohio

Age 37: "I'm married, have 3 children, and am employed as a research chemist. I'm interested in flying saucers, the Shaver Mystery, and psionic machines. Hobbies include stamp collecting, s-f magazines, photography, and radio. Will look forward to hearing from others."

SYMPHONIC MUSICIAN

Miss Zita Carno: 2020 Creston Ave., Bronx, 53, N.Y.

Age 22: "I'm a symphonic musician (pianist-composer-conductor) and an inveterate baseball fan. In s-f my tastes run to humor and ESP, hypnotism, telepathy, and allied subjects. I hope to hear from others similarly inclined."

STUDENT

Gary Cahill: 111 6th Ave., SW, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Age 14: "I'm a student in high school, with interests including s-f, jazz, and girls, in that order! I am interested in corresponding and also in obtaining old issues of s-f magazines."

ASPIRING NURSE

Jo Ann Imms: 665 Osborne Ave., Verdun, Que., Canada.

Age 17: "I am a high school junior,

aspiring to a nursing career. I like hockey, football, and books of all kinds. I would like to write to anyone my age, especially servicemen overseas and otherwise who do not receive much mail. I can also correspond in French."

BOOK COLLECTOR

Kathryn Barr: P.O. Box 4649, San Francisco, Calif.

Age 30: "I am interested in books, and would particularly like to write letters and trade books with anyone in London. I will answer letters, of course, from all foreign and U.S. fans. Also interested in flying saucers, like dogs, reading (of course) music, and record collecting of all kinds."

MODERN SPELLING FAN

Ellen Kahn Crouch: "Casablanca", Sterling, Va.

Age 27: "I'm married, and both my husband and I are s-f fans. I would like to hear from readers who share my interest in revised spelling. I have worked out a system which I call 'Representative Spelling'. Will be happy to send a sample to anyone interested. 'Reespell' as I call it is designed to clear up the ambiguities in our spelling: 'Reespell' must have only one spelling for each sound and one sound for each spelling."

GERMAN STUDENT

Dietmar Schleicher: (14a) Backnang, Hohenstaufenstrasse 14, Wurttemburg, Germany.

Age 16: "I hope you will be able to inform young s-f fans in my age of my desire to correspond with them. I have been interested in s-f since 1954 and am a member of the Science Fiction Club Deutschland. I collect s-f books, magazines, and pocketbooks. My use of English is not the best possible, but I can answer in both it and German."

SAILOR

Gerald L. Pond, HM3/USN: Field Medical School, Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, Calif.

Age 19: "Individualist, voracious reader of widely varied diet. My interests range from protozoa through theoretical math to ESP. I like classical music, my favorites being Beethoven and Vivaldi. No Elvis Presley or bop."

STUDENT

Bob Caulson: 301 Chestnut St., Eau Claire, Wisc.

Age 16: "I'm a sophomore in high school, with a major hobby of collecting and reading science fiction books and magazines. I'd like to have a pen-pal my age."

OFFICE WORKER

Miss Barbara Kleinbeyer: 88-37 181st St., Hollis, L.I., N.Y.

Age 20: "I do credit work but hope to be in college soon majoring in social work and psychology. I read most everything and am an amateur short story writer. Cooking is my favorite pastime. I hope to find new pen pals."

STUDENT

Leslie Gerber: 201 Linden Blvd., Brooklyn 26, N.Y.

Age 13: "I like popular music but not the Elvis Presley type. Am a member of an Elvis Presley Hater's Club with a club bulletin called 'The Croaker'. Membership is open to all! Will be happy to write to all s-f fans."

STUDENT

Richard Walters: 5384 Cornwall Dr., Dayton 5, Ohio

Age 13: "I am a high school student, interested in astronomy, science fiction, music, and most aspects of science in general. I would appreciate hearing from others with similar interests."

WOULD-BE WRITER

Joseph Martinez: 1140 St. Johns Pl., Brooklyn 13, N.Y.

Age 30: "I'm single, trying to successfully write short stories, with other major interests including science fiction, stamps, flying saucers, and fan magazines. Would like to hear from guys and gals both here and abroad, interested in writing, s-f, or stamps."

STUDENT

John Saseen: 1317 Eoff St., Wheeling, West Va.

Age 13: "I'm a student with major interests in chemistry and astronomy. Hobbies include science fiction and stamps. Would like to hear from others."



What Is Force?



YOU would think, after Newton and Einstein, after the accomplishments of modern physics, that a question like "what is force?" would be a joke. Everyone knows what a force is and furthermore it is accurately defined in every physics book by "force equals the product of the mass by the acceleration."

This pat answer is not good enough.

The trouble in answering it comes down to explaining what mass is. You measure mass, it

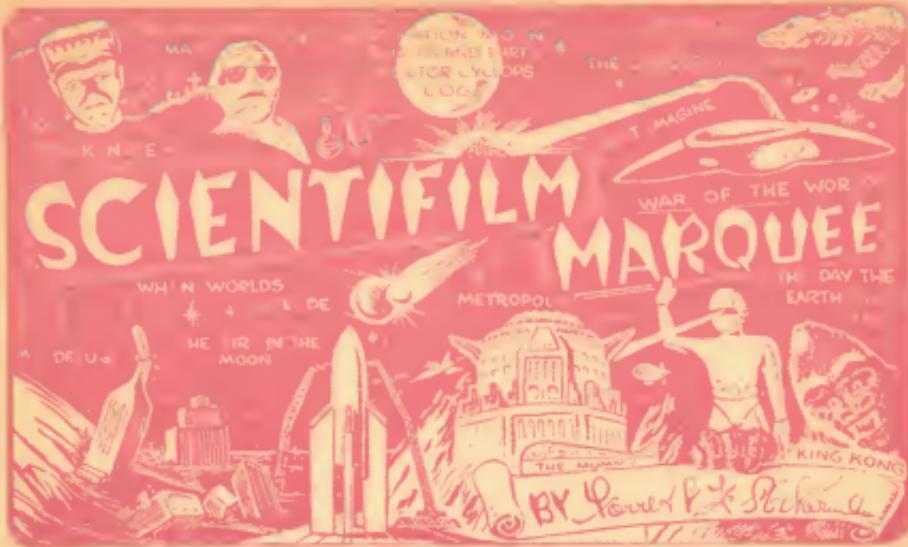
turns out, by measuring its acceleration to a force. By this circuitous route, you arrive at the conclusion that either you know what mass is or what force is.

The problem of defining force and mass (since it was pointed out by Ernst Mach) is not easy. An additional complication is introduced by the fact that mass and energy are equivalent and this fogs the picture more.

If you can define "force, or mass," run, don't walk, into the nearest university physics department!



"I wish you'd gotten a look at its mother before dragging it back here."



CAT MAN ON *a Hot Tin Moon* will definitely not, Ray Bradbury has asked me to assure readers of this column, be his next movie. However, Robby the Robot, hot tin star of *FORBIDDEN PLANET*, will return in an MGM scientifarse, *The Invisible Boy*. Latter is not based on the Bradburyarn of the same name (Nov. '45 *Mademoiselle*) but comes from "The Invisible Boy" by Edmund Cooper, published in the 23 June 56 issue of *Saturday Evening Post*. Comedy of Timothy, "the world's worst problem child", and Peeping Tom, a meb (that's "bem" spelled backward) or Mobile Electronic Brain, the cinemadaptation has been made by Cyril Hume. The Peeping Auto-maTom of the magazine version has undergone a conversion to Robby the Robot for picture purposes. An interesting behind-the-scenes note is that, when you begin reading pub-

licity releases in the newspapers and nationals about *The Invisible Boy*, an internationally known sci-fi author, now here in Hollywood, will have flacked out said film fodder. Watch for the fine Martian hand of Jerome Drexel Bixby in the printed media puffs about the pic.

Speaking of fine Martians, I have never seen 4 finer ones than those created by Blaisdell for *Attack of the Saucer Men*. Paul has really outdone himself. With those bulging bulbous brains fitted over the heads of a quartet of dwarves, I was ready to look around for the nearest saucer at the buffet dinner party thrown by Malibu Productions on Sound Stage No. 6 of Ziv Studios on completion nite of the aforementioned picture. Sam Merwin Jr., and Martin Varno were on the set with me to hear the spontaneous applause of the actors, crew and spectators at the con-

clusion of the recording session on the Martian language. The young comedian who played Happy in television's *Space Patrol*, gave out with extemporaneous twitterings in high and low Martian that were a scream to hear and almost gave mike-fright to the mike. Incidentally, watch the work of Steve Terrell, who plays the hero in this adaptation of Paul Fairman's "Cosmic Frame", and you'll be seeing the performance of a genuine sci-fi fan.

In case you ever meet Rita Hayworth, she can talk s.f. intelligently with you too. Question is, could you talk intelligibly to Rita Hayworth about sci-fi—or anything else? I tried, but lost my nerve when my tongue got tied behind my eye teeth and I couldn't see what I was saying; oh, well, look at Noel—he's a Coward too. Of course, I even get flustered in the presence of Robert Bloch; but then, you never can tell when he's going to put the bite on you for a buck. Or just put the bite on you. Vampire, you know. Pity.

Hollywood Reporter called filmoguls' attention to van Vogt's new novel, "Empire of the Atom", with these glowing words: "In view of the greatly renewed interest in science fiction among motion picture and TV producers, this new story by one of the leading craftsmen in the science fiction story field should attract interest. There is almost unlimited scope in 'Empire' for speculation and imagination, and van Vogt is no slouch at manipulating the intriguing materials." Pocketbook rights were immediately snapped, England asked to see it, French, German, Italian, Swedish and Japanese editions are

anticipated, and Geo Pal, Mike Todd, Wm Alland, Paramount, MGM and other Studios are studying the novel's novel film potentials.

May be something cooking, Robert Moore Williams phones me, on his "Chaos Fighters."

Pat Murphy, Cober Productions' human dynamo, outlined a fascinating idea to me at lunch about a *Sonic Man*. I've a hunch this would make a bang-up sight-&-sound double-bill teamed up with Frank Quatrocchi's *Projected Man*, about a guy whose darkest troubles are all light.

Thad Swift & Norman Rice have come up with a scenario synopsis, *Sinvala*, based on an idea in Edmond Hamilton's "Valley of Invisible Men". Hamilton's "Plant Revolt" is being considered as a companion for *The Volcano Monsters*, lb Melchior-Ed Watson collaboration . . . Jack Williamson's "Wolves of Darkness" will be produced in London. His "Metal Man" has excited the interest of a major star . . . Jerry Wald's assistant, Curtis Harrington, who wrote, produced, directed and acted in a fantasy film while still a teenager, has blossomed out with a fullfledged shooting script, *She Came From Beneath the Sea* . . . Alex Gordon has announced a sequel to *The She-Creature*.

INFORMANT Don Grollman tells me Catherine Turney's modern Gothic horror, "The Other One", available as a Dell pocketbook, will have its title changed for marquee value to *Back from the Dead* . . . Milner Bros have started production of *From Hell It Came* . . .

Lizzie is a fantastic film of a trio of personalities inhabiting and fighting for possession of one body — Eleanor Parker's, adapted from Shirley (Lottery) Jackson's novel, "The Bird's Nest"; but if you happen to have missed it, much the same theme may be seen exploited in *The 3 Faces of Evil*.

Readers of this magazine who have been writing me for stills from their favorite scientifilms will find a fine spread of scenes from fantacinemas in the 4th issue of *AFTER HOURS*, due on the stands 3rd week in July. *Madge* and *Tales* both get a plug in the general article (3000 words) on the sci-fi field, plus there's this big sci-fi film feature with pix from *KING KONG*, *BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN*, *DESTINATION MOON*, *DR. CYCLOPS*, *INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN*, *TARANTULA*, *DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL* and many more.

Fresh from a solo screenplay at Warner Bros., *Mankunt in the Jungle*, Sam Merwin Jr. has been huddling in the home of the prexy of American-International about a hush-hush hi-fi sci-fi project!

Budd Bankson & Weaver Wright (the latter one of my alter-ego's) have about put the finishing clutches to an original screenplay, *Frankenstein from Space*. . . Rip Van Ronkel, who scripted the great s. f. record "Exploring the Unknown" (RCA Victor LPM 1025), is itching to climb back into the rocket saddle, may hitch up with Jack Williamson's "Dome Around America", Cummings' "Girl in the Golden Atom", Kris Neville's (from the pages of *Madge*) "Earth Alert!"

or one of several other spectacular stories.

Ah, Follywood, Land of Superlatives. No sooner *The Man of 1,000 Faces* (the Lon Chaney biofilm) than Ashcroft Productions announce they will film Al Avalon's *Monster With a Million Faces*.

The Girl from 2 Million AD will be the marquee title of Henry Slesar's "Bottle Baby". In the fastest scientifilm sale on record, a check for the purchase of the story was winging on its way from the Science Fiction Agency to the stunned author the day the magazine containing the yarn was distributed in Hollywood!

In a move for closer cooperation with Hollywood, Harcourt & Brace have supplied the Science Fiction Agency with advance galley proofs of Andre Norton's next s.f. novel, "Sea Siege", which the publishers believe to have great filmic possibilities. Studio bids are being invited.

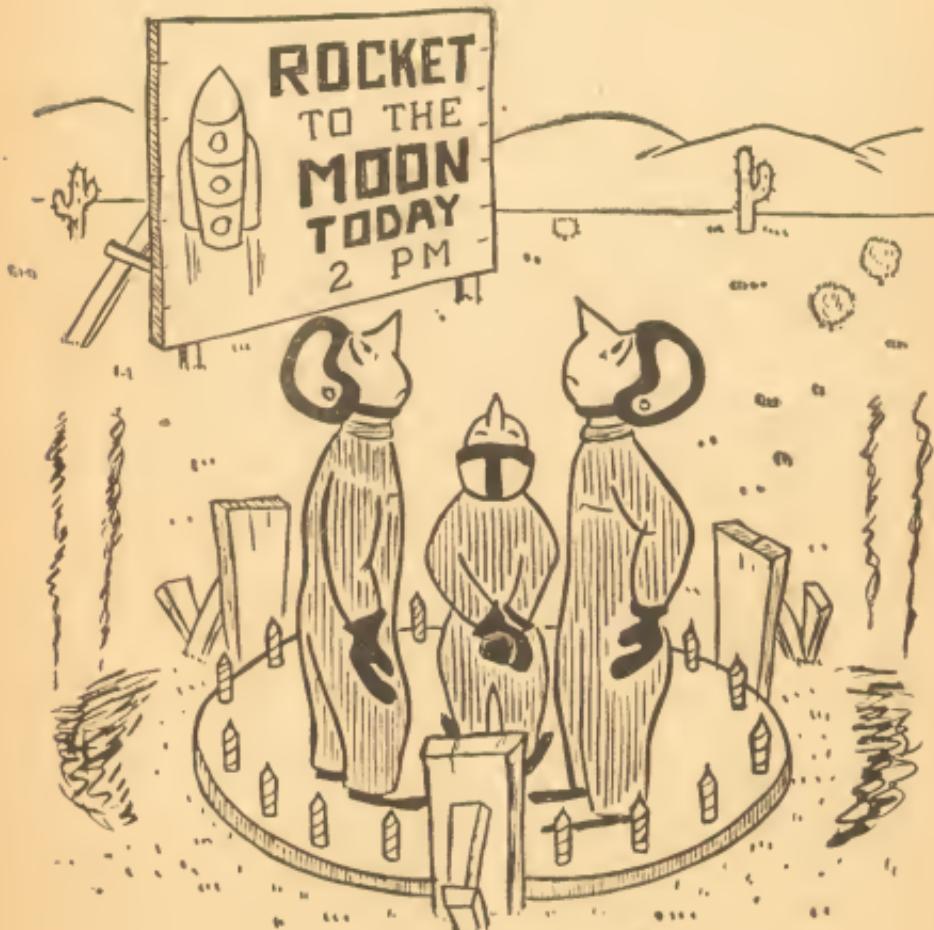
"Escapement" by Charles Eric Maine is jacket-blurbed as "a novel of uncanny brilliance which starts in 1962". Thanks to Ted Carnell for sending me the copy of this book, together with the information that it's being filmed in England under the title *The Dream Machine*. Dream doll Mary Murphy stars in this thriller about the invention that permits Adam and eavesdropping on the private thots of men and women.

Scheduled: MONOLITH, HOUSE OF MONSTERS, DAY OF THE TROLLIDS, THE TIME MACHINE, THE LAND UNKNOWN, CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN, I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF, MORPHEUS, PYGMY ISLAND,

THE AMAZON, QUEEN OF THE UNIVERSE, SHIPSHAPE HOME, THE SCREAMING WELL, THE AMAZING NTH MAN and THE FANTASTIC SHRINKING GIRL.

SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE is a regular feature. Columnist Ackerman may be contacted via the Beverly Hills, Calif., telephone exchange by interested contributors.

— Forrest J Ackerman



ALEX

Letters

from the Readers

SUB AGAIN, HE SAYS!

Dear Bill Hamling:

I have finally decided that I have to write to you about *Madge* and *Tales*. I have some comments about both of your mags I'd like to voice.

Most of your stories are good, but once in a while a bad one crops up. This happened in the May issue with Dwight Swain's THE HORDE FROM INFINITY. Now, this is real poor space opera. I know that you like to call it action-packed science fiction, and, for the most part, your stories are action-packed; but, sometimes they just become space opera.

Another gripe I have (in *Madge*) is your book reviews. I'd prefer a bit more about the story rather than commentary—and could you include more reviews?

That ends my gripes, so now for your good points. Your covers are fairly good—I like particularly the kind of covers that appeared on the January and March issues of *Tales*.

Your cartoons are the very best

I've seen, and everyone I show them to thinks they are the greatest.

I like FANDORA'S BOX in *Madge*, and SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE in *Tales*. I also like the idea of the COSMIC PEN CLUB in both mags. It's a good thing to let fans know a bit about one another and get acquainted by correspondence.

At this point I've convinced myself that I should take a sub to *Tales*—except that I already have one!

William M. Noe II
1204 Milan Ave.
So. Pasadena, Cal.

Sorry you didn't go for Swain's novel, but glad you do like action stories. Hope recent yarns are more what you look for. We aim to please!

• • • • • wlh

ZOOMING ALONG

Dear Bill Hamling:

The May issue of *Tales* was excellent. Space adventure galore. The novel, THE HORDE FROM INFINITY was great. And so were the short stories.

I always enjoy the features and science briefs. One can pick up knowledge from these informative pieces. Forthcoming movies mentioned in the MARQUEE department have me eagerly awaiting them. And of course the letter section always is informative of what readers are thinking.

All in all, IMAGINATIVE TALES keeps zooming right along the Milky Way . . .

W. C. Brandt
Apt. N

1725 Seminary Ave.
Oakland 21, Cal.

Heads up, gang, we just passed a comet!

• • • • • wlh

REPEAT CRITIQUE

Dear Mr. Hamling:

You've done it again with the May issue of *Tales* . . . produced an issue that is fun to read—even if it's only to laugh at. That cover is in the old tradition (the worst of the old tradition) and as such it amused me. The expressions on the faces of the two blue-skinned creeps add much to it.

And that story, of course: one man saves Earth from alien invaders and a mad scientist. Ghod! Next—Silverberg's story TWELVE HOURS TO BLOW! is distinguished only by the Z9M9Z tube. I don't know what to think of Silverberg now. The Z9M9Z is lifted straight from the Lensman series where it designated a mighty spacecraft. Quite a change from that, huh?

As it is, this story only supports my opinion of Silverberg—one of today's foremost fiction hacks. This is no condemnation of him—he can

write pretty good stuff at times.

THE MAN FROM SPACE is completely undistinguished. PAUSE IN BATTLE gave me the creeps. THE PINK PUPPY DOG—best in the issue. THE LAST KILLER a second best, not bad by general standards.

For a surprising change all the cartoons (barring the "Hairy Monster" which is in a class by itself) were funny. No females on alien planets—for the first time in how many issues?

It does me good to see you printing letters expressing a low opinion of your magazine. I would call it a point in your favor. Now there have been letter sections which had nothing but praise for the magazine. As a general rule I did not find them good magazines. Let me name names: the third issue of SUPER SCIENCE FICTION has such a letter section. Readers can judge for themselves. So, the presence of letters panning your mag—well, I call it a point in your favor as an editor.

By now you may have gotten the idea that your two magazines—*Tales* and *Imagination* are not among my top favorites. While you recover from that, let me point out that I am not a typical *Tales* or *Madge* reader. Fact is, I buy and read every mag on the market. I write letters to all the editors as well. I can only tell you about the many fans I know who do not care for your mags. Interesting point about the average age gleaned from the COSMIC PEN CLUB lastings: my tabulation comes to age 9 . . .

Think I'll do the same for AMAZING, later.

Dainis Bisenieks
33 Hinsdale H., E.Q.
Ann Arbor, Mich.

We have no set pattern in publishing reader letters. If pan letters come in we use them. If the orchids are prominent we don't hide them either. We work on the idea that you can't satisfy everybody all the time, hoping to please the majority most of the time. So far we've been pretty successful at it . . . don't know how you arrived at the average age business (from an accurate standpoint) so all we can say is, you're mistaken. But what the heck, even you can be wrong. . .wlh

OBJECTIONABLE COVER

Dear Editor:

I am writing to protest your cover on the May issue, the one depicting the flaming glass coffin, a naked woman, and blue fiends. I suggest that this cover is offensive in that

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AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. TC48

it has too much sex, violence, and, in general, luridness. I'm not "shocked", but repulsed.

A pretty good criterion of a magazine (and its artwork) is whether or not you would want it lying about on a coffee table, and whether or not you would want it in the hands of your children, or in view when your minister comes to call. It is artwork like that which belittled the science fiction field. Please be your own more particular censor.

Mrs. Anne Ragsdale, Jr.
7403 Axton St.
North Springfield, Va.

The whole idea of the May cover was to emphasize and depict a dramatic interpretation of a scene from the cover novel. In this we feel it succeeded. Perhaps a bit too garishly, in line with your comments, but in all honesty, not in a way we feel was "objectionable" in the moral sense. This, of course, is a subject of wide latitude, and the pros and cons are many and varied. We'll drop the issue thusly, agreeing with your last sentence. Rest assured we will. And, we trust, future covers on TALES are more to your liking.

NEW BUT AVID FAN

Dear Mr Hamling:

I am twelve years old and am an avid reader of science fiction, even though I have been reading it for just about a half a year.

I thought the May issue of *Tales* was a very good one. In order of preference here's how I rate the stories:

1. THE HORDE FROM INFINITY

2. TWELVE HOURS TO BLOW!
3. THE PINK PUPPY DOG
4. THE LAST KILLER
5. THE MAN FROM SPACE
6. PAUSE IN BATTLE

The first two satisfied my taste for rip-snortin' action. I'll look forward to more stories by Swain and Silverberg. Numbers 3 & 4 were good also, and even though I could foretell the outcome of THE PINK PUPPY DOG I still thought it was a fine yarn. Number 5 was nothing new and number 6 could hardly be called a story.

If I can scrounge up the necessary cash I'll have my subscription in the mail to you. In the meantime I'll be looking forward to the next issue.

Henry Kreidmann
25 W. 68th St.
New York 23, N.Y.

We're frankly surprised you guessed the outcome of THE PINK PUPPY DOG. We didn't. Maybe it was because we were hoping the ending would be a happy one. Yet, life frequently has its unhappy moments

so perhaps Mark Reinsberg did the right thing. Certainly it's a yarn you won't forget too easily. . . . wh

ONLY ONE GRYPE

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Your two science fiction magazines, IMAGINATION and IMAGINATIVE TALES are about the two best in the field today, with the exception of a couple which about equal your books.

The only gripe I have is—why don't you go up to 160 pages?

Kirby McCauley
2374 Sepulveda Ave.
San Bernardino, Cal.

Answer is very simple—production costs. In the past 15 years the cost of paper has tripled, and printing costs have not lagged far behind. Oddly enough, if EVERY reader subscribed the books could go up to 160 pages, since a more controlled print order could be established and the net money would be greater than normal newsstand profits. So ok, go ahead—EACH of you—turn the page and subscribe! . . . wh

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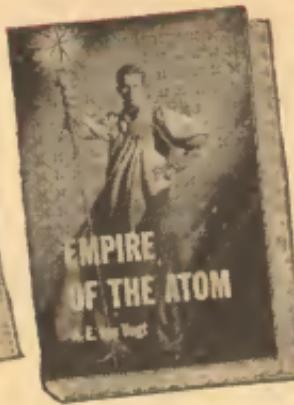
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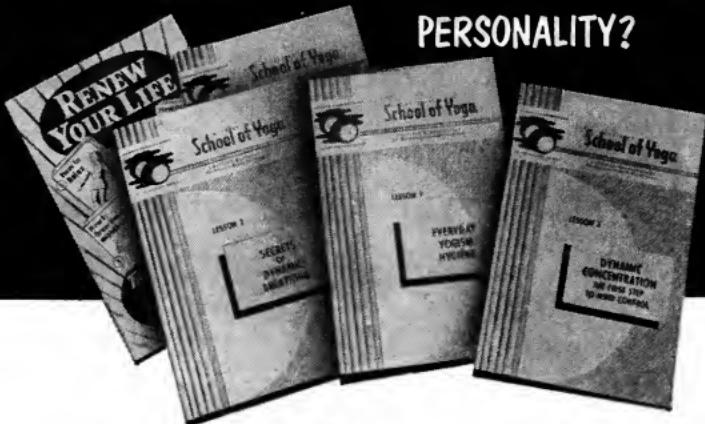
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